

Council glimpses '12 budget

Human rights, traffic movement discussed

By Ed Biller
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Butler City Council on Tuesday night discussed the city's 2012 budget, the creation of a city human rights commission and streamlining traffic movement on Main Street.

The council might vote on the human rights commission and traffic issues at its 7 p.m. Thursday meeting.

2012 Budget

Councilman Joe Bratkovich, the city finance director, gave the council a glimpse at the city's 2012 budget.

He estimates expenses will be about \$350,000 more than the \$7.84 million 2011 budget. As for this year, the proposed budget includes a \$600,000 tax revenue anticipation loan.

Bratkovich also expects the city to need about \$500,000 more either from the general fund or from a loan to balance its capital projects budget in 2012, in addition to about \$160,000 in prior year funds.

The city this year used a \$346,000 transfer from the general fund and \$178,000 in prior year capital projects funds to balance the capital projects budget.

Capital projects funds are used for items such as bridge and traffic signal repairs, flood prevention and blighted property demolitions.

Bratkovich said he estimated a 2 percent pay increase across the board for unionized city employees whose contracts are being renegotiated this fall.

In brighter news, Bratkovich said it appears health care costs will increase only by 2.8 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively, in each of the city's two health care plans.

"One of the first budgets I had, I estimated a 15 percent increase," Bratkovich said.

His budget estimates 95 percent tax collection.

The city council also will have to determine whether to take a loan to cover its expenses or to lower its debt service tax.

Currently at 9 mills, the debt service tax cannot collect money in excess of borrowed funds. According to Bratkovich, the city's eligible debt in 2012 is about \$234,000, which would require only about a 3.5-mill debt service tax to pay.

Bratkovich did not discuss whether the city's overall property tax rate would stay the same. Currently at 41.5 mills, the city's tax rate includes 30 mills for general purposes, 9 mills for debt service, 2 mills for a recreation tax and 0.5 mill for the public library.

Bratkovich said he will have an official first draft of the budget for the council's review by about the first week of November.

Rights commission

Although the city council in September approved the first reading of an ordinance creating a city human rights commission, council members second-guessed that decision on Tuesday. Such a commission would be to handle complaints for which no resources exist, such as sexual identity discrimination.

However, several council members now question such a commission's effectiveness or sustainability.

Bratkovich said that since the commission would hold no power, its decisions and findings would have to be ratified by the council.

He had said at a September council meeting that even with a volunteer board, such a commission would inevitably require legal advice at some point, incurring attorney fees.

Councilwoman Kathy Kline said the commission is a double-edged sword, since finding

seven to 15 volunteers to staff it would be daunting, but it might reflect poorly on the city if council opts not to create the commission.

Mayor Maggie Stock pointed out that 26 other third-class cities have such commissions. City solicitor Jim Coulter advised the council that such a commission creates a forum for people disappointed in daily decisions, making the city an arbitrator in situations ranging from employment decisions to housing disputes.

Currently, many such disputes are handled by state agencies or, in the case of housing, Perry O'Malley, who is the city's fair housing officer.

The council will vote Thursday on the second reading and adoption of the ordinance.

Main Street traffic

According to city zoning officer John Evans, Butler will apply jointly with Butler County for a grant to upgrade traffic signals on Main Street.

The SINC-UP project, organized by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, synchronizes signals for better traffic flow and is updated daily via satellite uplink.

Along with Main Street traffic signals between Wayne and Penn Streets, the signals at Washington and Jefferson, Washington and Cunningham, McKean and Jefferson, and McKean and Cunningham streets would be upgraded.

Evans said the grant is about \$500,000, and the application cannot be considered until the city agrees to participate if approved.

The council will vote on participation Thursday.

Evans said the city's contribution to the project would be about \$80,000, "but we are looking at alternative ways to fund that."

Evans said the city can expect a response on its grant application about 90 days after submission.