

City property tax to increase 7.8 %

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — Property taxes will increase 7.8 percent, some city services will be reduced and paid parking is in the cards as a result of Monday’s City Council vote on the 2010 budget.

The vote was 3-2 against the \$35 million budget proposed by Finance Commissioner Kenneth Ivins Jr.

But because Ivins’ proposal is the only one on the table, it becomes the official city budget anyway. The City Charter dictates that if the council does not adopt a budget, the budget becomes whatever the finance commissioner has proposed.

“It’s not an ideal budget,” Ivins said prior to calling for a vote. “It’s a tough economy out there, people are losing their jobs. We are at a difficult time and place.”

With this budget, 27 full-time city employees will lose their jobs, including seven firefighters, eight police officers and seven DPW employees. In addition, 17 part-time lines will be cut from the city’s five departments.

An amendment that Ivins proposed last week to his own budget never came to a vote, and no additional amendments were offered at the council table by any of his four council colleagues — Mayor Scott Johnson, Public Works Commissioner Anthony “Skip” Scirocco, Public Safety Commissioner Ron Kim and Accounts Commissioner John Franck.

Scirocco voted with Ivins in favor of his proposed budget. Johnson, Kim and Franck voted against it.

Of the five City Council members, only Kim will not have to deal next year with the ramifications of the budget: the other four were re-elected on Nov. 3, while Kim gave up his public safety position to run against Johnson for mayor. The 2010 City Council would be legally allowed to amend the budget after Jan. 1, according to the City Charter.

Monday's special City Council meeting, called for the express purpose of voting on the budget, began with a lengthy public comment period during which members of the public, as well as members of the police and fire departments, reiterated concerns that staff reductions will likely lead to increased overtime costs and decreased services.

Johnson and Franck both said that the inclusion of paid parking as a source of revenue to balance the budget was unrealistic, and voiced concerns that sales tax revenue would be less than budgeted.

"I've been in favor of paid parking, but doing it without a plan in place is not proper fiscal planning," Johnson said.

Ivins said that he had been discussing a plan for paid parking since March, and viewed the acceptance of his comprehensive budget as a charge to make sure the parking revenue — anticipated to be \$1.35 million — would flow into city coffers next year.

Paid parking, along with increased property taxes and budget cuts, have been proposed as necessary to close a \$6.2 million budget gap.

Kim said police and fire department staff cuts in the budget would jeopardize the city's safety.

"I've been accused of being an advocate for the Department of Public Safety, but I've always felt I was an advocate for the city's safety," Kim said.

After the meeting, Scirocco said he hoped that the council would be able to use the Ivins budget as a jumping-off point, and still search for ways to amend the budget to avoid some layoffs. While that may be possible, both Kim and Johnson said it was important to give employees reasonable expectations about their future prospects of continued employment with the city.

The council actually could have worked on a proposal for one more week: the City Charter required a budget vote by Nov. 30.

However, no additional budget meetings are scheduled, and Ivins has said that he does not plan to revisit the budget between now and then.