

LT budget introduced with 1.7-cent tax rate increase

By CHRISTOPHER SOUTH
Cape May Star and Wave

VILLAS – Lower Township Council considered the 2011 municipal budget for introduction, Monday, including a 1.7-cent tax rate increase.

With Councilman Glenn Douglass on vacation, Councilmen Tom Conrad and Erik Simonsen said they approved of the budget, while Deputy Mayor Kevin Lare said he would like to see the increase reduced to less than a cent. Lare said the financial team had worked hard on the budget, but he thought collectively they could do better.

“One-point-seven cents is not something I’ll support. I hope to get below one-cent. We can’t get to zero without losing jobs, and I don’t support that,” he said.

Mayor Mike Beck said the so called “tool kit” that arrived from the state was no

help. “It’s \$50,000 out of a \$25 million budget. That’s like taking a nickel off a \$25 bill at a restaurant. And that’s exactly what it is. It saves us five cents for every \$25 in the budget,” he said.

Beck said it was fortunate the council saw “the train coming down the tracks” long ago.

Beck said the workforce has been reduced from 144 employees down to 129, and that is the reason the township is in a favorable position with the budget. However, he said they cannot continue to cut positions.

“Pension and healthcare reform have to come,” he said.

Bay Avenue resident Ed Butler told council they should not wait on a tool kit to be supplied by the governor.

“I was never supplied tools...I bought my own. You

should buy your own tools,” he said.

Beck said people should consider that there was no tax increase last year, but Butler said he is looking toward the future.

Tampa Avenue resident Frank Sarocco asked Municipal Auditor Leon Costello to explain “becoming legal,” an expression he used in his presentation.

Costello’s budget presentation was similar to what he presented last year.

“This is a good budget, so far,” Costello said.

Lower Township has a proposed \$24,508,935 budget, which he said meets the state-mandated spending cap and tax levy cap. He said Lower Township’s budget fell below those caps, so the township had a legal budget they could send to Trenton for approval. He said other towns he reads about in the newspapers have

had trouble meeting the cap requirements and are therefore introducing layoffs. Costello said some other towns, which people have heard are issuing layoffs, are not doing it simply to have no tax increase, he said they are doing it to get under the budget caps. Costello used the expression “becoming legal” to mean getting the spending and tax levy under the 2 percent spend cap and the levy cap.

Conrad said he was happy with the budget, saying, “We’ve been cutting the fat year after year. The only thing left (to cut) is services.”

Costello said there was a 4.1 percent increase in the levy, which puts the budget about \$150,000 under the cap. He said the township could technically spend another \$150,000, but the cap prevents them from raising the taxes to do it.

He said the township has seen a decrease in revenue every year, but the decrease was relatively stable in 2010.

“You are in the minority in this,” he said.

Costello said the township had cut salaries fairly significantly, and cut expenses. On the other hand, the cost of pensions and healthcare rose. He said the township received the 2012 pension numbers on Friday and the township’s pension costs would rise \$160,000 in 2012. He said there is healthcare reform legislation in the state legislature which proposes employee contributions on premiums of 30 percent. He said the November elections, with 120 legislators running for seats, might prompt them to act on healthcare and pension reform.

Costello also said the township lost \$5 million in rates, in 2010, but that was not

significant. “But you are used to \$20-30 million increases,” he said.

He said the purpose of the meeting, which began an hour earlier than normal, was to get the budget on the table. He said council could meet as many times as they want until April 4, when they are required to adopt the budget. He said they could take no formal action until that time.

The township council also approved an increase in the number of Class II officers from 10 to 12 the Lower Township Police Department may employ. Captain Brian Marker said the department currently has eight Class II officers with another in the academy, but some of them were being interviewed by the Department of Corrections, and they would like to have plans in place for the coming summer season.

Boro squabbles over contribution to WCM fire company

By CAIN CHAMBERLIN
Cape May Star and Wave

WEST CAPE MAY – Borough commissioners engaged in a heated argument over the volunteer fire company budget, last Wednesday, at a special budget meeting.

Commissioner Ramsey Geyer believed there should be more funding for the fire company, but Mayor Pamela Kaithern and Commissioner Peter Burke disagreed.

Geyer, as Director of Public Safety, oversees the volunteer fire company as well as the public safety budget. He said he submitted a budget to support the things he knew the fire company needed, totaling \$44,625, based on information he received from the personnel involved with the VFC.

Kaithern and Burke felt that

a 3.42 percent increase for the fire company would have to suffice, which would reduce that figure to \$41,125.

“The bottom line is, the borough only has so much money to go around,” Kaithern said.

Kaithern said the fire company can also raise money independently, such as renting out their banquet hall for events like weddings.

“Instead of having the hand in the taxpayers pocket, they should look at the revenue stream that they have with the building,” Kaithern said.

She said a single wedding can bring in \$1,000, so one wedding per week could be \$52,000 a year.

“There aren’t that many weddings,” Geyer replied.

After the meeting, Geyer said the fire hall only charges \$700 to use the banquet hall for a wedding, and only averages 30 to 40 events a year,

‘The bottom line is, the borough only has so much money to go around,’
– Mayor Pam Kaithern

which are not all weddings.

Geyer asked Kaithern and Burke what the borough would pay for with regard to the fire company. Burke and Kaithern responded by asking for the fire company to disclose all rental income, community contributions and other sources of independent revenue before they would consider providing more funding to the organization. Kaithern said the taxpayers have the right to know that

bring in. We want to know what they’re paying for.”

Burke requested a list of what the fire company pays for out of its own funds.

When Geyer asked why they needed to know that information, Kaithern replied, “Because you’re asking for more money from the taxpayers.”

Kaithern said the borough paid the fire company’s insurance and electric bill. With over \$40,000 in the line item for the fire company as is, there was \$10,000 for insurance and over \$20,000 in an additional line item dealing with the VFC. She said there were a number of ways in which the local taxpayers were supporting the fire company.

Burke noted the fire company answered calls in areas outside the borough, in Lower Township south of the Cape

May Canal. He asked how much money the fire company received for covering that area and how much West Cape May taxpayers were spending to cover it.

Kaithern said West Cape May received only \$1,500 per year from the Lower Township fire company. Geyer said the fire company made one call to that area in the past year but Kaithern said there were more than that.

Once the heated discussion was over and the \$41,125 line item was agreed upon, Auditor Leon Costello read the figures of the 2011 budget. The budget is currently at \$2,139,306 compared to \$2,316,156 in 2010, which included grants not found in this year’s budget. He said borough residents can expect a tax increase of 1 cent for each \$100 of assessed value.

Vote

Continued from page A1

be a “disservice” to the taxpayers. Swain said a 1 percent reduction in Salary and Wages is a start but more

could be done. “I feel given our current situation there should be a freeze on salary increases until our economic climate strengthens,” she said.

Swain said local businesses and employees were suffering due to the economy and a tax increase would only make matters worse.

“The local business envi-

ronment has had to recreate itself, while managing higher utility costs, the reduction of foot traffic and increased competition from neighboring towns,” she said. “Store fronts that were a part of Cape May for generations have closed or relocated. Hours of operation are less and long time employees have been laid off or forced to take early retirement packages.”

Mahaney said council must clearly indicate their position, positive or negative, on the adjustments made after

the Feb. 18 special meeting. He also wanted council members to provide clear statements concerning their positions regarding the current 1-cent tax increase.

Murray offered his opinion of Mahaney’s suggestions at the meeting.

“I want to make it clear I am not willing to gut out personal safety departments,” he said.

He said the Beach Patrol is included in the city’s beach utility, which has its own budget. Murray said he was not positive that the mayor’s proposal to eliminate a police

lieutenant position was viable and the two positions at the fire department had already been filled. Mahaney said the positions had not been filled by fulltime employees.

“My proposed changes in the Public Safety Department will not reduce safety or put the city in danger in any way,” Mahaney said.

He said after the other members of council address their suggestions and concerns, the budget could be introduced at the March 22 meeting or at a special meeting held prior to that.

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Tower

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He said if the replacement option was considered, the city would qualify for a \$515,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture along with a \$1.6 million low interest loan. Roberts said there was no way of knowing how long it would be before the tower needed repairs again if the city opted for the \$800,000 rehabilitation process. He said he wasn’t positive if the steel tower could handle sand blasting for repainting either.

Mahaney said that he hoped the city could phase the cost

of a replacement tower into its debt service program so the city could retire old debt before adding more with the new structure.

Photographic evidence he provided city council members showed an exponential increase in rusting over the past 10 years. According to Roberts, the worst area of rust on the tower is where the pipes actually meet the tank. He said he would also provide an action plan next month to cover maintenance issues and the possible erection of a new tower in place of the existing tank at an adjacent location.

However, Roberts needed

to research whether the fire department would have sufficient water pressure if the current water tower was not used while a new tower was being constructed. The top of the tower also holds multiple cell phone service antennas.

City Manager Bruce MacLeod said the current tank holds 700,000 gallons, but Roberts said a 750,000 gallon tank would be ideal as a replacement and adequate for fire company water pressure. The issue will be further discussed after Roberts’ action plan is presented.

Lights

Continued from page A1

installing such lights. Foster said the program includes 13 locations, including one in Woodbine and in Upper Township, which are already operational. He said a couple more of the flashing lights will be installed later this

month. Foster said the county issued a contract for the underground work – foundations, wires, etc., and county employees installed the poles, wires, and the hanging displays. The blinking lights at Broadway and Pittsburgh have solar panels, but Foster

said not every location in the county was conducive to using solar power.

He said the entire project was funded by Cape May County.

Crosswalks at intersections

Many intersections such as along Beach Avenue are marked as pedestrian crosswalks. Foster said the law, which he has said is not understood, has become more confusing.

“The law says to stop for pedestrians in a marked crosswalk. If it’s not marked, you have to yield to pedestrians,” he said.

Foster said a crosswalk occurs wherever there is the intersection of roadways, but not all are marked.

“If it is marked you have to remain stopped while the pedestrian is in the crosswalk,” Foster said.

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