

Budget Cuts: Shaffer Unveils His Plan

Contributed by Scott Merzbach - Amherst Bulletin
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A worst-case budget scenario in which more than 10 positions would be cut from various departments, including one police officer, two firefighters and two laborers at the Department of Public Works, has been outlined by Town Manager Larry Shaffer.

The \$17.78 million general fund budget proposal by Shaffer, given to the Select Board and Finance Committee Jan. 15, was crafted by reducing this year's budget by 3 percent to be consistent with Finance Committee guidelines.

The reduction means a drop of \$1.47 million from this year's \$18.33 million budget. "These are cuts we would not make under any circumstances, except we don't have the revenue to support it," Shaffer said.

Shaffer said the budget proposal, if state aid meets the 10 percent drop forecast by the Finance Committee, would do tremendous damage to the services residents receive.

Of the cuts, though, \$896,313 are in what is being called "Tier 2" - spending that Shaffer envisions being preserved through passage of a Proposition 2½ tax cap override March 23.

Among these cuts, Shaffer said the police roster would be down to 44 officers through one expected retirement. Other cuts in this tier are eliminating one emergency dispatcher, not filling two positions at the Fire Department, reducing the animal welfare officer from full time to part time, terminating two DPW laborers, one in the Highway and one in the Parks and Commons sections, and lopping four additional positions from administrative functions.

These administrative positions include a customer assistant at the Leisure Services and Supplemental Education department, a customer assistant at the town clerk's office, a customer assistant at the collector's office, and a combination of reducing hours for a data processing specialist at the Police Department and an administrative assistant at the senior center. "None of these cuts are recommended," Shaffer said.

Instead, Shaffer said his hope is that the full package of Tier 2 reductions will be endorsed by the Select Board for the override. The cuts were listed by their priority for restoration, with fire and police heading the list, followed by DPW and support services. The least important restoration would be equipment for Cherry Hill Golf Course and additional help for the Mill River swimming pool.

"We put these in order of where we think they should be," Shaffer said.

Assistant Town Manager John Musante said if the cuts go forward, the Police Department could return to a force size that existed 10 years ago, even though police calls for assistance are going up. The department is authorized to have 50 officers, but has been steadily losing positions because of budget cutbacks.

Musante said the loss of one person from the town clerk's office would return the office to only doing core services, forcing it to give up passport processing.

Finance Committee Vice Chairwoman Kay Moran said this needs to be studied because passport processing brings in money and the loss of the position could have revenue consequences.

Shaffer said his budget proposal is extremely damaging to morale for the workforce. The preparation of the budget, and notifying employees and department heads what would happen, made the second week of January one of the worst weeks he's spent in public service, he said.

Meanwhile, \$570,211 of reductions are what Shaffer is describing as "Tier 1" cuts that will happen with or without an override.

This includes saving \$91,176 by eliminating cost-of-living adjustments for non-union personnel, \$107,561 by having police officers forgo their cost of living adjustments and \$95,440 by reducing health insurance premiums from 6 percent to 3 percent.

The police union givebacks, Shaffer said, preserved two officer positions that would otherwise have been eliminated. Just over \$60,000 more could be saved in the budget if similar givebacks are offered by the unions representing the DPW and the service employees, but the DPW has already voted not to make this concession.

Musante said Amherst officials are finalizing an agreement to share the costs of a sanitarian with the city of Northampton. This will initially mean an \$11,543 increase in cost, but regionalizing will end up saving money.

If all cuts have to be implemented, it would mean the budget, over the last two years, would have gone down by \$2.8 million, or 4.3 percent, and 26 positions would be lost, Shaffer said.

Select Board Chairwoman Stephanie O'Keeffe said she appreciates that Shaffer's budget plan found several alternatives to use of the general fund, such as through regionalizing and grants. O'Keeffe said she was pleased to see Shaffer make efforts to reduce services, but not eliminate services entirely.

Shaffer also prepared budgets for the enterprise funds, including water, sewer, solid waste and transportation. "I can assure you they are all in good shape," Shaffer said.

Source: Amherst Bulletin