Council Meeting Reveals Knowledge of Line Items

Tuesday's Bossier City Council budget workshop was the occasion for a review of the city administration's General Fund spending plan for 2013 – a plan with which Bossier citizens should be reassured with respect to the use tax dollars. But, apparently it's also a plan at least one Council member said he'd had little time with which to become acquainted.

District 4 Council member Larry Hanisee's concerns will be addressed down the line a bit.

City Finance Director Joe Buffington gave an overview of the underlying "assumptions" related to the development of the city's 2013 General Fund spending plan. Among points from the revenue side of the plan, Buffington noted that sales taxes for next year are projected to be flat; the approaching federal "fiscal cliff" and fair amount of uncertainty are influences in local planning; and that some economists predict a financial decline in the first two quarters of next year.

Buffington also noted that while we are marginally ahead on sales tax collections over last year's collections, the last couple of months have been somewhat down. He further observed that while the city has managed to keep property tax millages flat, the city does realize the benefit of "organic" growth – or the business build-outs between assessment years.

Importantly, Buffington reminded council members that the General Fund Budget is about 50 percent funded by sales taxes.

As it concerns the expenditures side of the General Fund Budget, Buffington detailed increases over last year's budget, including a two percent salary increase for all city employees except for department heads and those whose salaries are regulated by state law. He also briefly discussed an increase in the cost of employee health/dental benefits, and increased retirement contributions for fire and police pension funds.

In short, Buffington's overview generally confirmed that Mayor Lorenz "Lo" Walker and the City Council are on the same page in maintaining tight reins on the city spending and accountability for taxpayer dollars. District 1 representative Scott Irwin described the budget as "very conservative."

Following Buffington's comments, city department heads explained all substantial increases in their respective department's budgets – there weren't many — and interestingly, some creative savings efforts. The Bossier City Fire Department is notable for its several recent "savings" initiatives, the latest of which resulted in a decrease from $63,000 to $8,000 annually in the cost of laundering of uniforms.

But Council member Larry Hanissee's issue wasn't so much with savings; instead he was primarily concerned with the lack of a Police and Fire Department budget allocation for educational incentive pay. Haninssee recalled that in his previous service on the Council, this was a "valuable" expenditure, and he expressed interest in the reasoning for discontinuance of the allocation.

At-large Council member David Montgomery was quick to respond in asking Hanisee, "Where are you going to get the revenue?" Montgomery went on to note that there are other areas in which money can be spent – but the city cannot afford to do so.

And, Montgomery suggested that the purpose of the meeting was to entertain city department head's explanations of significant increases in line items in their respective budgets – and not to rehash the General Fund budget, which might have more appropriately been done in regularly scheduled administrative budget meetings.

Hanisee pursued his budget concerns, particularly as to “where to squeeze out of the budget for educational incentives,” and again drew Montgomery’s attention.

“This is an overview of what the administration has proposed, but it’s not an opportunity to interrogate the (budget) process … this is not the venue,” said Montgomery.

After the workshop, I visited with Hanisee regarding his insinuation that wasn’t invited to any of the city administration’s budget meetings, and he said that he had “ … not been included in any meetings until today” and that he “ … was told that I would have a chance to ask any questions …”at Tuesday’s meeting.

On the other side of that issue, Mayor Walker said that his office provided a schedule of all budget meetings via e-mail to all Council members, which was followed by an e-mailed revised schedule of all meetings.

“We tried to make it convenient for all,” said Walker – who recalled that “sometimes two or three Council members” were present for a meeting, but that “ … only two showed up consistently – David Montgomery and Bubba Williams.”
It looks like the Mayor’s office has produced a solid 2012 General Fund Budget – which must be approved by the Council by December 1, 2012 — and that while all Council members were afforded an opportunity to be part of the planning, apparently not all chose to participate.

And lastly, as it concerns Mr. Ken Shiflett’s November 5 rebuttal to my October 26 column, my apologies for misspelling his name in that column.

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