

CityClerk - Why City Council Should Consider A Larger Maximum Tax Levy for St. Paul's Budgets

From: Greg Blee <gnb1948@hotmail.com>
To: Mayor Chris Coleman <chris.coleman@ci.stpaul.mn.us>, <lee.helgen@ci.stpa...
Date: 9/8/2011 10:51 PM
Subject: Why City Council Should Consider A Larger Maximum Tax Levy for St. Paul's Budgets
CC: "Paul Williams, StP Deputy Mayor" <paul.williams@ci.stpaul.mn.us>, Nancy...

Kathy Lantry, President
 Saint Paul City Council

Respected Council Members,

My name is Gregory Blee. I own my home in the Battle Creek Area, Ward 7. I have lived in St. Paul for almost 64 years. I love my City and want you to take responsible action to keep my city safe and well maintained for my family and for future generations. St. Paul is a marvelous place to live, and I ask that you continue to invest in safety, infrastructure and the essential and quality services that make our City so wonderful.

I am concerned that Honorable Mayor Chris Coleman did not recommend a large enough property tax increase for the 2012 City budget. To increase the City's share of the tax levy by 6.5% only raises an additional \$6,150,000 for services, while the 2012 Local Government Aid (LGA) cut is 19.5% at \$12,185,000.

The two decade history of St. Paul Mayors and City Councils holding the line on property tax increases for City services is so remarkable. St. Paul elected City officials' restraint in the use of property taxation has been so positive, and has contributed to St. Paul being such a livable first class city.

The recent history of LGA cuts has forced Minnesota cities to continually reduce services. Some people believe budget cutting has produced some positive affects. And I would bet they are correct, when the budget cutting first started. But now, cutting services and maintenance does not serve the general public well being; it will ultimately produce much higher future costs for both social services and infrastructure replacement. And quality living will be reduced.

Council members, you know better than I, that it gets harder every year to find ways to balance budgets without drastic cuts to essential services. And, you all also know of some constituents who have lost jobs and cannot afford to pay daily living expenses, much less higher taxes. I know your budget deliberations are stressful and complicated, with very few black and white answers. You have to address competing interests for services and budget financing, with both happy winners and unhappy losers, regardless of what decisions you make. **You have a paramount obligation to meet the common good needs of St. Paul residents and to protect the City's capital assets.**

Next week, you are going to have to vote on the Maximum Property Tax Levy for 2012. The Mayor had the courage to recommend a 6.5% tax increase. **I strongly encourage the City Council to give itself some 2012 budget decision making flexibility, and adopt a Maximum Tax Levy Increase of at least 10%.** A ten percent

increase would give you an extra \$3.3 million to restore some of the proposed cuts, if you collectively believe the impact on essential services would be too severe

The Mayor and his staff have been looking at budget detail since the beginning of the year. The Council has only seen budget summaries for the past three weeks. As you hold department budget hearings though November, I am sure you will find some budget surprises that you (our elected seven member policy-making body) may want to adjust.

Having \$3.3 million of extra taxing flexibility may not have been important in past years, when budget cutting was easier. **This year, having some taxing flexibility is really the prudent, responsible thing to do, as the Mayor has been forced into recommending service cuts at all levels.** In November, after the Truth-In-Taxation Hearing where all residents get to communicate their concerns over both services and taxes, you can then decide on a certified Property Tax Levy needed to finance essential services. In theory, your final City tax levy decision could be lower than the Mayor's proposed, or it may need to be higher if his proposed service cuts are deemed to be unacceptable to your constituents.

Tonight, President Obama submitted to our county a USA jobs program to help rejuvenate our dismal national economy. He proposed both spending cuts of non-essential government services and raising some taxes. He requested that Congress, elected officials and all Americans support his plan, as he deemed it necessary for the long-term well being of our country. **Like our President, I hope the Saint Paul City Council can act assertively to maintain essential services, and do so in such a way to not create more unemployment in St. Paul.**

Some people I talk to believe the City's Public Library is a non-essential service, now that the internet exists. Please reject that narrow thinking. Libraries are a sound investment in the future well being of all St. Paul residents. How can educating children and non-english speaking adults be non-essential? How can helping people find jobs and having disadvantaged families access the world-wide-web be non-essential? How can having a safe place for teens and senior citizens go the learn and relax be non-essential? Please know that St. Paul Public Libraries are essential, and should not be targeted for major reductions.

Most of you know me to be objective and a relatively quiet moderate. I have had a 30 year career of analyzing budgets to find ways to keep property taxes down. **You need to know that there are many St. Paul residents who are willing to pay more taxes, to protect our City and help our community stay healthy and protected.** Thus, I encourage you to consider a Maximum Tax Levy higher than a 6.5% increase. Then, after three months of budget hearings and public hearing input, you can make a more informed final tax levy decision in December.

In closing, I would like to say that I am extremely proud of past budget proposals and deliberations by Mayor Chris Coleman and this Council. I know you all have work hard and deliberated with good intentions to protect the citizens of St. Paul. I am confident you will do the same for the 2012 budget...hopefully this time with a little more taxation and a little less service cutting.

Respectfully requested,

Greg Blees

Always... Have A Good Day, Smile First, and Tip Your Hat To A Stranger! 