

Final two budget hearings are next week

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript

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The city has already had two of the budget hearings that were scheduled to take place in the review of the State Fiscal Year 2010 municipal budget, and there are two more left to go.

The next two meetings are scheduled to take place on Monday and Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. in the Council Chamber of City Hall. The previous hearings were on Dec. 28 and Dec. 30.

The current schedule is a revamped one from the original that was announced weeks ago, before Christmas. Due to the numerous vacations and employee travel associated with the holidays, the city was forced to adjust the hearing schedule.

"We regret that, due to the temporary unavailability of staff in the week between Christmas and New Years, we are unable to broadcast or tape for the Web site the hearings on Dec. 28 and Dec. 30," Business Administrator John Mason said in a posting on the city's Web site, www.ci.orange.nj.us.

"We apologize for the inconvenience."

The Dec. 28 hearing was for the Municipal Court, Law Department and Police Department. The Dec. 30 session was for Community Services and the Fire Department.

The hearing on Monday will feature the Administration, Finance, Planning and Development departments. On Wednesday, the Public Works and Engineering Department, Public Library and city Clerk's Office will be under review.

"We anticipate the meetings will commence in Council Chambers at 6:30 p.m. in the Municipal Council Chamber, 3rd Floor, City Hall, 29 North Day Street," city Clerk Dwight Mitchell said.

Anyone interested in obtaining a copy of the budget hearing schedule can call the city Clerk's Office at 973-266-4027. The proposed SFY 2010 budget has been posted on the city's official Web site at www.ci.orange.nj.us.

On Dec. 1, the City Council unanimously voted to introduce and approve Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr.'s proposed budget for State Fiscal Year 2010 Tuesday night at their regularly scheduled meeting, but that was because it came in at less than the 10 percent tax increase that its failed predecessor contained. But, according to former Councilman William "Bill" Lewis, there wasn't any big secret or creative bookkeeping or fiscal management behind the apparent 2 percent decrease in Hawkins' budget.

"It went down because they finally factored in the extra money they got from the state," he said. "So even though Councilman Corbitt gave the administration credit for submitting a budget with a tax increase less than the 10 percent they originally proposed, the fact is they didn't do anything at all. That first budget they submitted should never have been as high as it was in the first place, the same way the first budget number they put out for the 2009 budget with an 18 percent tax increase should not have been as high as it was."

The City Council passed the \$53 million amended Fiscal Year 2009 municipal budget on May 27, months late and long after it had initially been introduced by Hawkins on Sept. 16, 2008. Last year's budget was approved approximately one month before the end of the fiscal year on June 30, 2008, and that is something officials and taxpayers involved in the process said they don't want to see happen again.

But the fact that the SFY 2010 budget, which should have been introduced and approved and submitted to the council for their review in September, was only just introduced and voted on two weeks ago, does not bode well for local hopes that the 2009 process won't be repeated.

"We must show more concern toward the taxpayers with this budget and keep it as low as possible," At Large Councilman and Council Vice President Elroy Corbitt said at the Dec. 1 meeting. "I'm glad to see the budget has come in lower than it was two weeks ago."

Now that the budget has been officially introduced, it is in the council's hands to review and revise it as they see fit. That also meant that it could be turned over to Bruce Meyer and the members of the Citizens Budget Advisory Committee for their review and any recommendations they might make on behalf of the city's embattled and in some cases soon to be impoverished unless the tax, funding and fiscal management situation in town undergoes a significant change some time in the near future.

According to Meyer, Karen Wells and a group of concerned citizens will be having an open public forum on Jan. 16 at 1 p.m. in the library to discuss the budget. Anyone who visits the city Web site can see the SFY 2010 budget numbers posted there showing the \$58,440,120.69 "spending plan" that represents an increase of \$3,682,621.16 compared to the SFY 2009 budget.

However, those numbers are for the proposed 10 percent tax increase that Corbitt and other council members opposed and they have not been adjusted for the decreased 8 percent tax rate that they approved more than two weeks ago