

# Council awaits budget

By Chris Sykes  
Staff Writer

Nearly a month into the new fiscal year, some City Council members are calling on Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. to present them with a preliminary budget so they can begin the vetting process.

At Large Councilman Elroy Corbitt said he believed the council members would like to work on a new budget soon because they do not want a repeat of the 2009 and 2010 delays which lasted until late in each fiscal year.

"You can't work on a budget unless you have something to work with from the administration, and we haven't received anything yet," he said. "This year, we're not looking for any Extraordinary Aid from the state, so that's not even an issue. We need to be more proactive this year than ever before, but we can't move on anything until we get a budget from the mayor."

Last year the city received \$500,000 in Extraordinary Aid from Trenton.

During the council's July 1 reorganization meeting, one resolution provided for the adoption of a \$23.1 million temporary budget. Another resolution established a preliminary municipal tax levy.

After some prodding from Corbitt, John Mason, the city's business administrator, admitted the temporary budget contained a 9 percent increase in the municipal tax levy over last year. That, said Mason, translated into a \$3 million increase from the 2010 budget for taxpayers.

Even though Mason said those numbers represented a preliminary figure to be revised when the 2011 budget goes out, Corbitt said it demonstrated a lack of sensitivity to Orange taxpayers during a recession.

Corbitt added the increase flies in the face of the new 2 percent tax cap instituted by Gov. Chris Christie and the Legislature. The cap does include exemptions, such as for employee health costs.

"It does not make a whole lot of sense for Orange to be approving a 9 percent tax increase when the rest of the state is instituting 2 percent tax caps and looking to cut costs wherever they can," said Corbitt. "It's going to be a tremendous challenge for us to get our budget down to 2 percent when that takes effect next year. I hope the intent of this administration is not to circumvent the new tax cap laws."

The 2010 budget contained a 10 percent tax increase when it was introduced by Hawkins in December 2009. That \$58.4 million spending plan represented a \$3.7 million increase from 2009. The increase eventually was reduced to 4.3 percent. City officials said the smaller tax increase translated into \$200 per household for the 2010 fiscal year, which ended June 30.