

Council schedules budget hearings, worries over delay

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer

Two weeks ago, the City Council voted to accept the municipal budget introduced by Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. even after a contention that the statement he read to them was different from what was submitted along with his revised budget numbers.

Those figures will be further changed beginning next week as the council announced the schedule for budget hearings with representatives of city departments. Input from the directors will be considered as the council makes adjustments to the 2010 fiscal year document.

The hearings begin Wednesday for the Hawkins administration along with the finance and planning and development departments.

On Dec. 28, the municipal court requests as well as the law and police departments will be reviewed, and the community service and fire departments will be discussed on Dec. 30. Meetings are scheduled for 6:30 p.m. each night in the council's chamber in City Hall. The proposed municipal budget has been posted on the city's Web site at www.ci.orange.nj.us.

On Dec. 1 the City Council unanimously voted to accept Hawkins' proposed budget, said some members, because it came in at less than the 10 percent tax increase in the initial proposal that was rejected.

According to former Council man William "Bill" Lewis, there was not any creative bookkeeping or fiscal management behind the apparent 2 percentage point decrease in Hawkins' next proposal.

"It went down because they finally factored in the extra money they got from the state," said Lewis. "Even though Councilman Elroy 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 council passed the \$53 million 2009 budget on May 27, months late and long after it had been introduced by Hawkins on Sept. 16, 2008.

Council members said they are worried that the 2010 budget, which they said should have been submitted to the council in September, was sent to them just two weeks ago and this does not bode well for avoiding a repetition of last year's delay.

"We must show more concern toward the taxpayers with this budget and keep it as low as possible," said Corbitt during the Dec. 1 meeting.

According to the introduced budget, the Hawkins administration has come up with a \$58.4 million spending plan that represents an increase of \$3.7 million over the 2009 budget. Those figures were within the initial 10 percent tax increase that Corbitt and other council members opposed.

When the 2009 budget was introduced, it contained a proposed 18 percent tax increase that Hawkins and council members whittled to 6.8 percent. The final budget came in at \$53.7 million, more than \$4 million less than what was introduced.