

ORANGE COUNCIL VEHEMENTLY VOTES DOWN HAWKINS' BUDGET

BY WALTER ELLIOTT

ORANGE : The city's 2010-11 municipal budget went from Mayor Eldridge Hawkins, Jr.'s introduction to the entire Municipal Council denial in about five hours Jan. 18-19.

All seven council members voted against the Hawkins Administration's proposed \$54.1 million spending plan at 12:05 a.m. The city had been operating on temporary or emergency monthly appropriations since July 1 until the layoffs and demotions of 76 municipal employees took effect Jan. 11.

The council's rejection means that the process of approving a final budget has been postponed to until Feb. 2. City elders are to adopt the administration's preliminary budget before scheduling a series of departmental meetings and public hearings. A final budget, with any council changes, is to be subjected to a final vote.

A majority of Orange's council voted against approving two bill lists totaling \$1,641,061.54. City elders also turned down awarding a \$50,000 snow plowing contract to the Shauger Group, of East Orange, and a \$171,717 crossing guard contract to DMS Systems, of Jersey City.

The five-hour conference and regular meetings turned acrimonious towards its fourth hour, peaking when a majority of council members walked out on Hawkins' remarks regarding city-union negotiations.

Hawkins, during the conference session, introduced a \$54.1 million Fiscal Year 2011 spending plan which is \$3.2 million less than last year. The mayor, however, is calling for \$37.4 million to be raised through property taxes - a \$4.2 million or 14.1 percent increase.

"State cuts contributed to a \$6.4 million gap in Orange between revenue for FY 2011 and the money we need to run the city," said Hawkins. "Nearly half of the gap is Gov. Christie's \$3 million cut in state aid and Urban Enterprise Zone funds which would require a 10 percent increase in our property taxes. The rest of our budget gap is caused by \$1.4 million in higher costs and \$2.1

million in reduced revenue."

The additional \$1.4 million in expenses, said the mayor, are from an \$11.6 percent increase in health insurance costs and a 22 percent increase in pensions. Hawkins explained that most of the increases are part of unfunded state mandates and honoring current labor contracts.

The \$2.1 million decrease in revenue, continued Hawkins, came despite bringing in some \$4 million in tax rates. He cited the \$375,000 lost in property tax appeals before the Essex County taxation board for part of the loss.

The 14.1 percent proposed increase, the mayor added, compares to 14 percent in East Orange, 16 percent in Newark and 17 percent in Irvington. Hawkins cited shared services with East Orange, a new landlord apartment inspection fee, increase grant-seeking and reorganizing several city departments for part of reducing what he said would have been a 21 percent increase.

"To significantly cut spending we MUST [mayor's emphasis] reduce the cost of city employees," stressed Hawkins. "Salaries, benefits and personnel-related items and other mandates are 95 percent of our spending. Since police, fire and public works are 83 percent of Orange's personnel costs, those departments must suffer the largest reductions."

The mayor repeated that he delayed introducing the budget in the hope of negotiating give backs with the five municipal bargaining unions. Hawkins said that those negotiations fell short although he held hope for future talks that could bring back some of the 52 workers that were laid off Jan. 11.

Several council members said they had received Hawkins' proposed budget as early as Jan. 13. Local Talk received an e-mail copy early Jan. 11. What hard copies that were available on the council chamber lobby sign-in table were gone by 7:30 p.m.

The entire council, as summed up by South Ward Councilman Edward Marable, Jr.'s comments, were not sold on Hawkins plan. Marable said

that he had noticed several salary and vacancy errors in the proposal and criticized the administration's approach.

"I see several names of laid off employees who are listed as active," said Marable. "The administration has been acting as if it was a newlywed who stopped talking with his or her partner after the marriage - and resumed talking after two or three years."

At-large councilmen Elroy Corbitt and Rayfield Morton plus North Ward Councilwoman Tency Eason took several moments to explain that their proposed Dec. 21 alternative budget was a means to spur the administration into introducing a budget. Their alternative plan would have called for saving the 76 employees' positions by the eliminating three departments. Several public speakers, including two volunteer coaches, championed the preservation of the recreation department - which the council's plan would have scrapped.

The council's unanimous denial of the proposed budget came after they agreed to add it onto the consent agenda as a late starter - and then separate it from the other seven consent resolutions. Council President Hassan Abdul-Rasheed, with council consent, also added a ninth consent resolution to continue Claude Wallace as substitute City Clerk.

The council, except for East Ward Councilwoman Linda Jones-Bell, voted against approving the two bill lists. The panel rejected a snow plowing/removal bid from Shauger, which would amount to a rate of \$120 to \$175/hour, by the same 6-1 margin.

All city elders rejoined as one in rejecting the awarding of a prorated \$171,000 contract to DMS. DMS' contract called for replacing the Orange Police School Crossing Guards with their own on 26 corners or intersections at \$18 an hour. The savings would have also come from the company's own in-house benefits.

Two crossing guards, both in the public speaking segment and with Local talk during a recess, said that there would be 26 permanent and

another 13 substitute guards and a supervisor that would be affected by the outsourcing. Many of the primary and substitute guards are residents who have been on their beat for decades - not unusual, given that the guards have been part of the Orange Police Department since the early 1960s.

Both guards and Morton disagreed with the guard posting hours as written in the proposal. An administrator said that the hours were based on actual observation. Morton also said that there was no provision in DMS' proposal to offer positions to the incumbent guards and supervisor.

Both Hawkins and Firefighter/Orange Mutual Firefighters Benevolent Association Local 10 President Elvin Padilla had different perspectives on the hours and degrees of good faith in negotiations. The disagreement resurfaced when Abdul-Rasheed granted Hawkins two minutes to respond to public speakers' questions and comments.

"The union leaders have a responsibility to their workers," said Hawkins. "My responsibility is to the residents and taxpayers of Orange. It's not easy to negotiate when one is undermined by a council - some of whose members take the unions' view."

Hawkins was referring to the council's hiring of an attorney in a separate suit against the Hawkins Administration over the delayed budget introduction. At-Large Councilwoman Donna K. Williams said that their suit was a separate docket number that that of the unions who sought an anti-layoff injunction Jan. 6-11.

When Hawkins mentioned "undermining," however, Williams rose from her seat and asked her colleagues to leave the council chamber. All except Abdul-Rasheed did; Abdul-Rasheed allowed the mayor to finish his two minutes and then called a five-minute recess.

"I apologize for disrupting the meeting but not for objecting," said Williams. "The mayor is a guest in our chamber. I will explain more at the next council meeting."