

# ORANGE COUNCIL RECEIVES HAWKINS BUDGET

**BY WALTER ELLIOTT**

**ORANGE** : The City of Orange Township Council officially took in the Mayor Eldridge Hawkins, Jr. Administration's Fiscal Year 2010-11 budget during a four-hour meeting here at City Hall Feb. 15.

All seven council members, by unanimously adopting Hawkins' budget, have started their own final approval process clock. Orange's elders have at least 28 days to publish the administration's budget as a legal notice and schedule a series of departmental and public budget hearings. That spending plan and the hearings are to be announced after Local Talk's deadline.

The Hawkins budget is to also go to Orange's Citizens Budget Advisory Committee and council Budget Consultant Dieter Lerch. Former CBAC chairman Bruce Meyer had complained in previous recent council meetings that a lack of detailed budget information has not been forthcoming from the administration to the committee or Lerch.

The council will have the ability to

change Hawkins' budget - but after at least March 15. State law prohibits any governing body's budget alterations for 28 days. Council members, for example, want to restore \$100,000 in school crossing guard funding that Hawkins' administrators had deleted.

The full council, in the combined Feb. 2 and 15 conference and regular meetings, also passed five budget-related measures. The Feb. 2 meeting was postponed and eventually merged with the Tuesday night sessions due to the lack of a functioning City Hall boiler.

The related measures were:

- Filing an application with the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs' Local Government Board for a waiver on the four percent property tax increase cap.
- Establishing a cap bank in case the budget's appropriation limits are exceeded.
- Approving three bill lists, going back to Dec. 2, for an overall \$2,173,631.53.

The council had decided on not approving some 65 days of bills

because that were not sure if the city had the funds to pay for them. Although the city has been running on monthly temporary budget allocations since July 1, several council members said that they have not received line item or budget details as they would like from the administration.

What may have appeared as a nearly \$2.2 million council protest against uncertain administrative spending, however, appeared less so after city Business Administrator John Mason's explanation. Mason, while answering at-large councilman Elroy Corbitt's questions, said that he had to use his discretion to draft some checks in the interim.

"There were some checks that had to be sent out as part of a contractual commitment," said Mason during council comments. "Some bills had to be paid to our contractors and vendors to keep the city running. We have to keep the lights on, for example, and buy bullets for the police."

Both Mason and Lerch explained that Orange - among other towns - have this last chance to ask the state

government to ask for a four percent property tax cap waiver.

"This is the last budget year where any municipality can file for a waiver hearing," said Lerch. "As of 2012, the state will place a two percent property tax increase cap. We cannot make a waiver or appeal - but can put the appropriation up as a voters' referendum."

The Hawkins administration projects a 14 percent tax increase on the average household or commercial establishment, based on the average property's assessed value.

Lerch further explained that Orange's waiver is subject to the DCA board's scheduling.

"When we file an appeal with the Local Government Board, we wait for the board to hear our case," said Lerch. "They hold hearings once a month in Trenton."

The three council members who comprise their budget committee has been meanwhile drawing up an alternative FY 2011 plan. Parts of that alternative plan may be brought up during the public hearings.