

Council takes budget with lower tax rise

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer

The City Council unanimously voted to accept Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr.'s proposed budget after it came in at less than a 10 percent tax increase.

During its Nov. 17 meeting, the council refused to accept the 2010 fiscal-year budget as some members said the Hawkins administration gave it to them shortly before the meeting. That action, they said, did not allow them time to review it before a possible vote.

At the time, At-Large Councilman Elroy Corbitt precipitated a somewhat heated diatribe from Hawkins when he asked why the proposed budget contained a 10 percent tax increase and if the administration could submit a budget with a lesser bite.

Two weeks later, Corbitt said he was happy to vote for the introduction because the tax increase in it was less than 10 percent. He said he would like to see the tax increase further reduced during the council's budget deliberations.

"We must show more concern toward the taxpayers with this budget and keep it as low as possible," said Corbitt. "I'm glad to see the budget has come in lower than it was two weeks ago." Now that the budget has been introduced, it is in the council's hands to review it. That also means that it can be turned over to the members of the Citizens Budget Advisory Committee for review. The committee, headed by Bruce Meyer, can make recommendations for budget adjustments to the council, which can accept all or some of the suggestions.

North Ward Councilwoman Tency Eason said she could not wait for the council's budget process, with all its hearings, to begin. Eason expressed a worry that the lone thing delaying the start is the council's lack of a budget consultant.

Eason asked Council President Edward Marable when the council was going to get a budget consultant. His response was that he did not have any answers for her at that time. Eason persisted in her request and raised the budget consultant issue again. That elicited an invitation from Marable to go out to a local eatery and have a dessert after the meeting with him to discuss it in more detail. She declined his offer.

"We need all the help we can get because it's going to be a tough one. I want people to understand, though, that I voted 'no' on the budget the first time because it was given to us at the last minute," said Eason. "If I had voted 'yes,' it would have been like giving the administration a blank check. I don't think our taxpaying constituents put us up here to do that."