

Hawkins to discuss budget during a forum on Tuesday

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

As he promised to do after being questioned about the city budget and impending employee layoffs, Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. said he will discuss his blueprint with residents.

Hawkins said he will present a forum on Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. in the City Council chambers inside City Hall. The mayor said it will serve as a prelude to the presentation of his proposed budget to the council on Jan. 18.

"On Tuesday, Jan. 11, together with the directors of our city departments, I will be holding a public forum on Orange's budget for the current fiscal year," said Hawkins. "While we will focus on the budget, we will answer questions about any issue affecting our city. The budget will be introduced to the City Council at their meeting on Jan. 18, the first meeting after the Jan. 7 deadline for possible layoffs."

Hawkins said he will discuss how his budget will reduce spending and add revenue in order to cope with an estimated \$3 million reduction in state-related aid to Orange.

"The directors will discuss the strategies of their departments to operate with fewer employees as well as the service changes and reductions forced by the state cuts," said Hawkins. "We have been forced to reduce municipal employment in a national financial crisis when most other governments and businesses across America have also been forced to



Eldridge Hawkins Jr.

downsize. You will be able to ask questions, receive answers, and express your opinions."

Hawkins said the forum also is expected to be broadcast on the city's public-access Channel 35. He added a summary of his proposed budget also would be posted on the city's website before to the forum.

By the time Hawkins presents his budget, the fiscal year will be 6 1/2 months complete. Hawkins said he believed there was a good reason to hold the proposed budget's presentation.

"Ever since last March, when Gov. Christie announced his cuts in state aid, Orange residents have been asking me to fight to prevent a huge increase in our property taxes," said Hawkins. "I

have heard their voices. That's why my administration did not introduce a budget earlier. We refused to introduce a budget with a 20 percent tax increase, and we wanted to do everything possible to reduce the need for layoffs."

That's why, Hawkins said, he has taken a hard line with the city's unions. He has said repeatedly that if all city employees accept a 20-percent reduction in salary and benefits, the layoffs scheduled to take effect on Friday will not be necessary.

Hawkins' demand, however, has not been met with enthusiasm by the employees or their union leadership. The mayor said the city cannot afford to maintain the current status with personnel.

"Layoffs may be necessary to close our budget gap, but before they are implemented, I still want to give our unions every opportunity to agree to salary, work rules, pension and benefit changes that could reduce our labor costs without costing jobs," Hawkins said Monday.

"We are still in negotiations with our unions for givebacks to minimize layoffs," he continued. "We are prepared to negotiate up until the very moment that layoffs take effect. The new budget, when introduced, will reflect the outcome of those negotiations."

Once the budget is introduced, Hawkins said he will work with the council, the Citizens Budget Advisory Committee and others in Orange to produce a final tab that minimizes tax increases and service reductions.