

# Council has voted to approve budget: Is passage in sight?

By Chris Sykes  
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The City Council voted to approve the final amended version of the State Fiscal Year 2011 Orange municipal budget at its April 5 meeting.

That means the way is now clear for the council to finally approve a municipal budget for SFY 2011 even though there is only a little more than two months left before it ends on June 30. According to John Mason, the city's business administrator, the final version of the SFY 2011 budget is \$53,051,700.95 with a public school levy of \$853,798.74.

Mason and other city officials said the final version of the budget is also basically the same as the proposed budget that Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. introduced and sent to the council for its consideration in January. The amended SFY 2011 budget still contains a 14 percent tax increase that Hawkins said translates into \$701 more from taxpayers than they paid in 2010.

Hawkins said that the amount due to be raised from property taxes for FY2011 is \$37.4 million compared to \$32.8 million in FY2010 budget. But he said the city is actually budgeted to spend \$3.2 million less to operate this year.

"The FY2010 budget totaled \$57.3 million," he said. "The FY2011 budget is \$54.1 million. This year's budget spends \$3.2 million less than last year. With layoffs, the municipal property tax levy will increase by 14.1 percent and this translates into an increase from last year of \$701 for the average tax bill in Orange."

City Council President Hassan Abdul-Rasheed could not be reached for comment about the amended budget by press time. Council Vice President Edward Marable said that he is sure that the council will pass the final amended budget soon.

"We did not pass the budget at the last meeting on April 19," Marable said. "It was not on the agenda and we didn't pass it, but that was about 2 1/2 weeks ago. We have to wait a proscribed period of time after approving the amendments to the budget before we can pass it. Voting on the amendments was at the first meeting in April. At last Tuesday's meeting we did not take any action on the budget."

Bruce Meyer, a member of the Citizens Budget Advisory Committee that is appointed by the mayor and the council, said late budget have become par for the course in Orange and that is not a good thing. He said that even though the council is set to finally approve a budget for SFY 2011 that is almost a moot point now that the year is almost over.

"In terms of the budget for this year, we're so late, that there's really nothing that could have been done to it by the council to control spending anyway," Meyer said. "Passing the budget now is really just about paperwork because you can't change anything. Looking at the budget when we finally got it, I did the same thing that I did two years ago by going through it line by line to see what we actually spent in each department, but it had nothing to do with choices. It came down to the fact that there was 'x' amount of money that was or was not spent, and that's what people called a budget."

Meyer said that some city departments came in with more expenses and spending than others this year the same way that they did last year and the year before that. But he said that there was no choice about the spending or any attempt to limit that spending in advance by establishing a budget.

"It was just a matter of seeing what had already been spent and done and accepting that it is what it is," Meyer said. "Hopefully we can do the budget correctly in the future. Anyone interested in seeing the CBAC's final report and recommendations can go online to the city's official website at [www.ci.orange.nj.us](http://www.ci.orange.nj.us) to see it."

Mason said that he can understand and relate to the frustration expressed by Meyer and other Orange residents and taxpayers. He said that this was the second budget that he has helped to prepare since he came to the city to take over as the business administrator after Jewel Thompson-Chin was let go by Hawkins, and the process has not gotten any easier.

"In terms of the process this was an exceptionally difficult year to construct a budget because of its reduction in state aid including Urban Enterprise Zone funding," Mason said. "We lost \$3 million in state aid and our pension costs went up 22 percent on top of the loss in state aid so we started out with a \$6 million shortfall. It took some time while we tried to work with the unions to reach a deal on concessions and givebacks that would have allowed us to keep them all on the job, but when that didn't work out we had to do a layoff plan."

Despite all of that, Mason said that the administration still managed to deliver a budget to the council in January. And even though that budget was months late, he said that it represented the best that the administration could do considering everything that it was up against.

"When the costs and expenses are as far out of kilter as they were this year, then it just makes everything harder and more difficult to pass," he said.