

Portland council postpones vote on budget again

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The City Council voted 6-3 Monday night to postpone a vote on the municipal budget to June 24 in hopes the state budget picture will be clearer.

The city's \$221.8 million budget includes a variety of cuts and fee increases to fill a \$10 million gap between projected revenues and expenses caused by a big drop in state aid and contractual salary and benefit increases for staff. The cost of city-issued blue trash bags will increase 35 percent.

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City Councilor David Brenerman suggested the postponement, noting that the Legislature has until June 17 until it adjourns. The city should wait and see the amount of funding for the city's general assistance and emergency shelter programs, he said.

Brenerman said that the city and state typically have a partnership with these programs, but the state is considering changing that.

"I want to know what the state's commitment is to this partnership before I vote on the city budget," Brenerman said. "I'd like to know where they're at on the issues that are important to us."

The vote came after an hourlong public hearing during which councilors were implored to continue funding the city's 75-bed emergency overflow shelter and to continue providing General Assistance to asylum seekers and visa holders.

Councilors Jill Duson, Nicholas Mavodones and Edward Suslovic voted against the postponements

Before the public hearing, councilors indicated they had prepared several budget amendments regarding General Assistance and the overflow shelter, as well as a full-time park ranger and the city's bike-pedestrian coordinator. But no amendments were put forward before the postponement.

BUDGET DIVIDE: The Finance Committee voted 2-2 to send the acting city manager's budget to the full council. That budget eliminated 24 positions, including 15 layoffs. The combined city-school budget would raise property taxes 2.9 percent to \$20.58 per \$1,000 of assessed value.

Councilors were split over a variety of issues, including the 2.9 percent property tax increase, use of \$500,000 in surplus funds and the proposal to create a housing safety office.

The council on May 18 postponed a budget vote in hopes that several state-level proposals, including the biennial budget, would become clearer. That move was against the advice of finance staff, who warned that continued delays could expose the city to greater financial risk.

The May 15 staff memo said delays could affect the timely collection of property taxes and continue to negatively impact staff morale, since a hiring freeze would remain in place and positions recommended for

elimination would remain in limbo.

“The negative implications become more severe each week the budget is not approved,” the May 15 memo states.

Since that meeting, legislative committees have given preliminary approvals to creating a \$2 million fund for emergency shelters and to continue providing general assistance to asylum seekers. But Democrats and Republicans still appear sharply divided over the budget, raising concerns about a possible government shutdown.

GENERAL ASSISTANCE TO IMMIGRANTS: The city has been fighting the LePage administration’s efforts to prohibit asylum seekers and visa holders from getting General Assistance, emergency aid vouchers for rent, food, clothes and medicine. Asylum seekers often rely on General Assistance until they receive federal authorization to work, which can take months.

The city joined Westbrook and the nonprofit Maine Municipal Association in making their cases before a Cumberland County Superior Court judge in May. At stake for the city is \$4.6 million that is being withheld by the state. If the city loses, local property tax payers would have to cover those costs.

Meanwhile, a Republican lawmaker has proposed a bill to eliminate benefits to these immigrants, and LePage’s budget also makes the change. If either of these efforts are successful, it is expected to cost Portland taxpayers an additional \$5.7 million, according to the city’s finance director.

Elijah Beya came to Portland in April to seek asylum after speaking out against the government in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He said General Assistance is a bridge that allows people like him to get a job and give back to the community.

“I ask the City Council from the depth of my heart to make the humane decision,” he said.

Sherman Street resident Wendy Chapkis urged the council to “stand firm” against Gov. Paul LePage.

“This is Portland. We don’t throw anyone under the bus,” Chapkis said.

“I don’t think it’s that hard of a decision. Stand firm. Do not do LePage’s dirty work for him.

EMERGENCY SHELTER: The former acting city manager also proposed several changes to Portland’s emergency shelter program. In February, the state informed the city it would no longer reimburse the city for the \$2 million operating costs of the shelter. The former manager recommended closing a 75-bed emergency shelter to save about \$150,000.

Jim Devine, a formerly homeless man who is now an organizer with the Homeless Voices for Justice advocacy group, became emotional when he began talking about the fear and anxiety felt by people who might lose shelter.

“It’s in difficult times like this we must stay together,” he said. “Let’s keep the smallest glimmer of hope alive. Shelters give people hope and rest. Every human being deserves these two things.”

Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, said local nonprofits have come together in the last month to align resources and focus on finding housing. Their efforts have resulted in the addition of seven additional housing counselors at the shelter, placing 10 people in housing, he said.

To close the shelter before housing can be found would “disastrous,” he said.

“Keep the overflow shelter until it is no longer needed,” Ryan said. “I think we can get to that working

together collectively as a city.”

HOUSING SAFETY: With councilors split heading into Monday’s vote, the Portland Tenant’s Union called on the city to create a housing safety office. The event, which took place Monday morning at City Hall, included a survivor of the Noyes Street fire, which killed six people in November.

In April, Donald Stain, 53, fell to his death from a second-story porch at his apartment at 563 Cumberland Ave., when the railing he was leaning on gave way, prompting a renewed call for a more proactive inspection program for rental units.

“We not only need more proactive housing inspections, but we need more thorough housing inspections,” said Grace Damon, a tenant union co-chair. “We don’t want to see anyone else pass away.”

The proposed city’s budget includes provisions for about \$600,000 to fund the safety office. The funding would be raised through a \$35 per unit fee on landlords.

The department would have three building inspectors trained in both fire and building code enforcement. The fee system also would help create a more complete database of landlords, helping the city track which buildings have been examined.

Carol Schiller is a Longfellow Street resident and president of the University Neighborhood Organization who witnessed the Noyes Street fire.

She said that the city has too many old, wooden buildings that are being rented by young people that are not being checked for safety.

“We owe it to them to invest in a housing inspection office to ensure that renters can live in safe buildings and this has not been happening in Portland,” Schiller said.

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