

Newton Needs a New Budget Process!

by Leslie Burg, Alderman at Large, Ward 3

Op-ed, Newton Tab, June 14, 2006

Newton needs a new budget process. That is the overriding impression I came away with after completing my first Aldermanic experience with “budget season” last week! What, I wonder, is the compulsion to leave the entire process until the last 45 days before it must be completed? While it is true that legally we have just 45 days to finish our work, the process itself is not limited to that number. It can and should begin earlier.

I want to back up a bit, because what happens with the budget each year should be based on a foundation of assumptions about what we want our city to be. In other words, we should have a clearly stated vision for Newton, one that is agreed upon by all of us, or as close to all of us as possible. We may want that vision to be, as the Comprehensive Plan suggests, Newton, as it currently exists. There’s nothing wrong with that. However, we should state plainly what comprises that view of the city. What are the elements and values that come together to create Newton as it is? What others might we find desirable? If we do not articulate the pieces of the whole, the whole becomes more difficult to achieve and/or preserve.

In addition to stating a vision for Newton, we need to set priorities. This is especially critical in times of financial exigency when funds are scarce and needs across the city are numerous. The vision we articulate will provide a basis for the priorities we set. Excellent schools, protection of the environment, neighborhood preservation—these are some of the core values in our community. Each has needs that must be met to enhance or simply maintain it. The way funds are distributed would be better understood if the city’s priorities were clear. Finally, the policies we establish should be informed by our priorities.

I think there is a vision for Newton. Priorities are evident in the budget document we receive, and we continue to establish policy on a variety of fronts in the work we do. However, I am not sure there is a shared vision, because there is no well articulated whole; there is no provision for collaboration of the Executive, the Board of Aldermen, and the citizenry, and there is very little transparency in the process.

We could change this if there was a will to do so. This year has seen three positive changes made by the Executive responding to requests by members of the board and Newton residents. We have a new budget book that is much easier to read and understand. We have a newly distributed five year financial forecast from the Executive working in concert with the President, President Emeritus of the Board, and our Comptroller, and we have an agreement by the Executive to work collaboratively with the Aldermen in allocating any new state aid that we receive. Since there seems to be at least a limited spirit of cooperation afoot, I would suggest the following alterations to the budget process.

Begin the budget process sometime in the fall. Members of the Executive could then meet with the Aldermen to discuss potential positive and negative factors affecting the coming year’s budget. An earlier start would allow time for the public to be heard through some mechanism that would encourage interaction with their elected officials. That might be public hearings or a citizen’s committee or some other medium. An open and interactive process would lend transparency and would help build public trust and confidence in the system. Further, a budget process that emphasizes collaboration and cooperation permits a consensus to emerge in which all parties bear some responsibility for the final product. Such an outcome would go a long way toward defusing the contentiousness that appears to run as a theme through the process currently.

In a democracy, many points of view are represented and it is the sometimes hurley-burley of arguing different ideas and perspectives that results in consensus, usually through compromise. It is impossible to satisfy everyone, but altering the budget process to allow for greater collaboration and transparency will ultimately serve all of us well.