

Residents register tax pain

The Bethlehem Gadfly Budget January 6, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on the City Budget* 

City Council approved the 2021 City budget last meeting, December 15.

That budget, you will remember, included cutting 4 firefighters, cutting 2 Service Center staff, moving money from cash reserves — and a 5% tax increase.

Gadfly did not sense significant resident opposition through the approval process, and he doesn't recall any resident commenters during the budget hearings.

But at City Council last night two callers reminded us of the hard times to which tax increases contribute.

Garrison St. resident (2 mins.):

She was “shocked” at the 5% tax increase. She wouldn't have “fathomed” that we'd do it at this critical time, the pandemic and etc. People struggling to pay rent, mortgages, put food on the table. “O, my god, this is crazy.” “Where's your compassion and sensitivity during this time?” When you're struggling to put food on the table, 5% is a lot. This was not the time to do something of this nature. “Everybody's under the gun.” I thought that our city wouldn't “even dare” do something like this.

Richard Ellis (2 mins.):

Other places surrounding us not increasing their taxes. Recalls tax increase because of the Hirko law suit. Raised taxes in 2017, 2018, 2019. Getting a 1.3% increase in social security, half of which will go to taxes. And there's the new water run-off charge. It's time to stop. He's a registered, regular voter, and he will "remember Ms. Smith and Negron and Mr. Waldron, who are up for re-election." "They will not get my vote. Us seniors deserve better."

Councilman Callahan (2 mins.)

Councilman Callahan is also up for re-election. Note that Mr. Ellis did not mention Councilman Callahan. Councilman Callahan was the strongest voice for cutting during the budget hearings. And he picked up on these phone callers and said that he "felt their pain" and reminded us that he did not vote for the tax increase. And he reminded us that we must "seriously look at" what we're doing tax-wise or we'll push out low-income housing. "Every time we have a tax increase, we make our city more expensive to live in." Everybody on Council is for affordable housing, a "livable city." If we don't start making some cuts and stop pushing development away from the city, there's going to be "tough times" in the next couple years. Councilman Callahan often cites his working-class Kaywin background as a point of reference for the need for fiscal conservatism, and if, indeed, he does run for Mayor, he is staking out a position as a kind of budget hawk.

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