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Shanley recommends 1.7% budget increase; Spending plan ends leaf vacuuming, freezes positions

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MANCHESTER - Town Manager Scott Shanley recommended eliminating curbside leaf vacuum service, leaving 22 vacant positions unfilled, and keeping Waddell and Verplanck pools closed in his proposed \$161.4 million budget for 2010-11.

The town would still pick up bagged leaves at the curb, but eliminating the vacuum trucks - a sacred cow in previous budgets - would save \$258,000 without having to lay off any employees, Shanley said.

"I recognize this is something we've avoided in past years," Shanley said as he made his budget presentation to the Board of Directors today. "We've done much to avoid direct service impacts. I don't think we can do that anymore and still keep the tax increase to a minimum."

The proposed spending package, which goes to the Board of Directors for review, reflects an increase of 1.7 percent, or \$2.67 million, over the previous year.

Under the proposal, town government would increase by 1.3 percent, or \$784,438.

School spending would go up 1.9 percent, or \$1.89 million, for a total of \$99.18 million under Shanley's plan. That's about half of the 3.98 percent, \$3.82 million increase the Board of Education requested.

School enrollment is expected to decrease by 104 students, or about 1.5 percent.

The school board says it needs the money because of increases in magnet school tuition, benefits and liability insurance, and transportation. It also added about \$300,000 to Superintendent Kathleen Ouellette's recommended budget to pay for a program for struggling students and expand the town's summer school offerings.

Teachers won't get a raise next year under a new contract. Town employees gave up raises in the 2009-10 budget, saving about \$800,000.

"We're talking with employees once again about concessions," Shanley said. "They understand the difficulties that Manchester and many other towns are facing."

There are about 503 town employees, and roughly 1,100 employed by the schools.

To fund the budget, the mill rate would increase by 3.4 percent, while the tax levy goes up by 3 percent.

The tax levy is the total amount raised in taxes, while the mill rate determines an individual's payment.

The mill rate would stand at 27.72 under Shanley's plan, an increase of 0.92 mills over the current 26.80 mill rate.

Shanley said a tax increase is needed to make up for the 0.2 percent decline in the grand list. It also

assumes state funding will continue to wane and that tax collection rates will also be down next year.

The net decrease in all sources of state aid to Manchester is \$103,000, Shanley said, noting that number is sure to grow as the state projects huge deficits in its own budget over the next few years.

Health insurance premiums, for both the town and employee contributions, also increased by about 12 percent. And the contribution to the pension fund will need to be augmented this year due to the poor performance of the stock market, Shanley said.

Utility costs are expected to increase \$170,000.

Beside the leaf collection and pools, Shanley says he would limit expenses in non-essential police programs, reduce the town's fleet and replace necessary vehicles with hybrids partially funded by grants, and reorganize meal and transportation programs at the Senior Center.

He would also refinance previously issued bonds and continue reductions in professional development and training, and supply and equipment accounts.

Directors were not surprised by the numbers and vowed to work together as they head into budget workshops starting Wednesday.

"It's a reality check," Democratic Deputy Mayor Leo V. Diana said. "But it's time for the town to take charge and put their money where their mouth is."

There are a significant number of residents who have lost their jobs or received a cut in pay, and a tax increase is a "double whammy" for them, he added.

But Shanley's "austere" proposal is a "good start," Republican Mayor Louis A. Spadaccini said.

"I do believe there's an opportunity to reach some consensus on this," Spadaccini added.

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