



CIVIC LEAGUE

For New Castle County

Informed Citizens for Sound County Growth

P.O. Box 11523 - Wilmington, DE 19850

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**APRIL
2007**

COUNTY COMMENTS

CIVIC LEAGUE FOR NEW CASTLE COUNTY

Informed Citizens for Sound County Growth

**Tuesday, April 17, 2007
MEETING**

7:00 PM at Troop 2

100 LaGrange Lane - Newark, DE - RTE 40/896

AGENDA

- New Castle County Council President Paul Clark's compromise legislation to address accessory dwelling units
- Arsenic contamination-panel discussion led by Marty Denison & committee

New Castle County 2008 Budget Calls for Tax Hike

By Marion C. Stewart

On March 20, 2007, County Executive Chris Coons presented his proposed Fiscal 2008 budgets at a special meeting of County Council. For the first time since the earliest Gordon years, the Operating Budget is lower than the year before. The proposed \$228,684,102 budget is 0.54% less than the fiscal 2007 budget of \$229,934,716. The Capital Budget is severely reduced, ending up at \$11,564,000.

If County Council agrees, property taxes will rise by 17.5%, an average of \$60 a year for people living in unincorporated New Castle County. That tax is 56.14 cents per \$100 assessed valuation, up from the current 47.78 cents. People in incorporated municipalities providing some local services pay less to the county; for instance, Wilmington residents will pay 19.49 cents instead of the current 16.69 cents.

The lower spending was achieved by a combination of staff cuts (61 positions, mostly vacant, with no layoffs planned), higher fees, a hiring freeze and a pay freeze for non-union executive and merit employees. Some of these measures have already begun or are in process of approval by County Council. Some special event programs, such as the Ice Cream Festival, have been cancelled.

Every department has been asked to cut its budget by 4%. The Office of Community Governing will be eliminated and its eight employees reassigned. (Billing assistance for maintenance corporations will be continued, however.) Next year, when union contracts expire, negotiations will address pay plans for more workers.

"There is something in this budget for everyone to dislike," Mr. Coons said. However, the county cannot go on spending more money than it takes in. Expenses in this rapidly growing county have been going up regularly, while revenue is expected to be essentially flat. Addressing the problem sooner

(continued)

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLE

◆ Monitor and selectively evaluate government actions including laws, regulations and policy.

◆ Provide appropriate forums for informing as well as soliciting input from the public.

◆ Establish positions based on responsible studies and consistent with the aims and purpose of the organization.

◆ Advocate these positions.

Founded in 1962, the Civic League is non-profit volunteer organization, which studies and illuminates County and State government actions concerning comprehensive developments and the quality of life and is a vocal advocate of relevant positions.

County Comments is the official publication of the Civic League for New Castle County.

Frances West,
President

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Land Use Dilemma (continued)

- ◆ Require local user financial resources for County pocket parks that, minimally visible, serve but local residents.
- ◆ Require local user funding to maintain and repair local development roads.
- ◆ For the County of New Castle, incorporate Parks, Planning, Police/Security and Paramedic Services, administered under State bodies, outsourcing non-security elements as available. Centralize under a State unit.
- ◆ Privately contract, under open shop, public works.
- ◆ Centralize at the State level, the library system and integrate under the state educational system. If we need but meeting halls and day care centers, discuss under a separate subject.
- ◆ Prescribe to a user fee system, rather than a real estate tax which currently does not reflect land values or immediate public cost for improvements when, eventually developed.

The County, again, is at a critical juncture of governance, particularly, in Land Use Planning. The current County Executive, despite the mythical Comprehensive Plan presented, should be commended for at least stating the financial, long term crisis.

In a broad sum, the above proposal reduces government costs, local government involvement, and, possibly, some of the Government entity in itself. There is a demonstrated history in this recent form of County Government (established as a departure from the Levy Court to an entity of Executive/Council Branches as counterchecks to indiscriminate land use) of becoming that body wherein costs are substantially underwritten by the State and federal governments, with only casual concern for the aftershock of residential growth in that schools, roads, water, hospitals, prisons, flood control, etc. is absorbed by somebody else.

rather than later is the responsible course, he believes.

A combination of more revenue and spending cuts is proposed. State aid is requested for stormwater management and some new tax permissions (tax on cell phone 911 calls, ability to bill insurance companies for emergency medical assistance, etc.) Other proposed steps which he mentioned were:

- Contract out running the Rockwood visitors center.
- Contract out equestrian operations at Carousel Farm Park.
- Charge more for contract police serving Middletown and Westover Hills.
- Keep debt service down by limiting borrowing. He proposes \$72 million in cuts from previous authorized borrowing.
- Raise fees in the Recorder of Deeds Office, Land Use, and some recreation programs.

Statewide rolling reassessment is badly needed, since the last reassessment in New Castle County was done in 1983. (Those for Kent and Sussex are even older.) NOTE: This would not be a windfall, since if assessments go up, by state law the tax rate must go down so that no more than 15% increase in revenue results in the first year of the new valuation. It would, however, make the property taxes more fair to have them reflect current values.

The County Executive invited everyone to help solve county problems. The first steps will be budget hearings of County Council, to be held on Monday afternoon in April and early May. (Read the Saturday Legal Notices of the News Journal for specific dates and times.) Council must pass budgets by June 1.

Information about the budgets may be found on New Castle County's web site, www.nccde.org. On it, look for Departments, then for the Office of Finance home page, which will have the budgets and an overview summary. Alternatively, call the Office of Finance at 395-5177.

COMMENT ON THE CAPITAL BUDGET

The 2008 Capital Budget was especially hard hit. Many worthy projects, approved in previous years (along with a few boondoggles--pick your favorite ones) have been canceled. Parks were cut by about \$13 million, including money to buy parkland in fast-growing southern New Castle County, where land is disappearing under houses at a rapid rate. Many years ago, the Civic League said, "If money is tight, park development may have to wait, but get the land!" That position seems as valid now as it did then. Parks are part of the Special Services Department. Park supporters are urged to come to the Special Services budget hearing on Monday, May 7, from 3:30 to 5 PM in the City-County Building, 800 N. French Street, Wilmington.

As always, the Civic League Budget Committee will study these Budgets and prepare a draft position for our Board to consider. If adopted, it will be presented to County Council. Everyone is encouraged to look at budgets and programs, and to make your views known. This is important; County Council needs to hear from you.

COUNTY OPERATING BUDGET	2007- 2008 Figures		
	Approved	Recommended	Difference
County Council	\$3,429,923	\$3,513,793	\$83,870
County Executive	3,939,603	2,242,466	(1,697,137)
Administration	17,227,570	15,664,000	(1,563,570)
Special Services	63,357,477	61,602,116	(1,755,361)
Land Use	15,253,907	14,704,056	(549,851)
Community Services	18,697,592	18,945,007	247,055
Public Safety	76,489,891	75,985,534	495,643
Prothonotary	50,600	58,300	7,700
Register in Chancery	299,601	247,903	(51,698)
Register of Wills	1,415,381	1,451,898	35,707
Recorder of Deeds	2,733,053	2,610,437	(122,616)
Sheriff	1,650,935	1,711,417	60,482
Clerk of the Peace	500,958	516,598	15,640
Debt Service	21,907,747	25,921,887	4,014,140
General Insurance	1,400,000	1,022,000	(378,000)
Ethics Commission	220,108	227,490	7,382
Contingencies(non-dept)	1,360,000	1,260,000	(100,000)
TOTAL	\$239,934,716	\$228,684,102	(1,250,614)

LAND USE/A DILEMMA /ACTIONS ON RESOLUTIONS

By CHARLES M. WEYMOUTH, AIA

CIVIC LEAGUE BOARD MEMBER

Over the last two years, the Civic League for New Castle County has made substantial efforts in not only defining County residential growth problems but giving input to County Government during the County Comprehensive Plan Update dialogue. The League is being consistent with a stated organizational goal of an improved quality of life for County residents despite the late-started government Comprehensive Plan. Of the alternate plans proposed by the County last fall, one alternate seemed to the League to have merit because of residential growth exported outside the County. Such was summarily dismissed by the County as excessive in cost due to necessary interstate road structure. Of course county officials accept no responsibility in absorbing any road costs nor proposing, nor commenting on the cost which has the greatest infrastructure impact. Since then the County's announced a preferred plan and made a prior confession they are going broke.

Meanwhile, seeing a very highly compensated County work force causing a substantial tax increase, the League has, early on, moved toward an alternate course. Last November and in subsequent months, the League passed significant resolutions. Elements of those contained the following recommendations: (1) For Transportation, retain the interstate Rt. 301 as the main Maryland, Virginia, Delaware interstate arterial connection to I-95 along its original dedicated alignment. (2) This past January, the League passed a resolution requesting a moratorium on all new residential growth; requiring comprehensive planning to be controlled at a State/Regional level with expertise in land planning econometrics; and requiring sponsor financing of ALL infrastructures needed for residential growth. In a side discussion, we recognized the mandatory requirements of economic generators to justify subsequent residential growth. Further discussed was the requirement to recover from existing residential communities those costs to repair long term deferred maintenance held by the County. Discussions also called for immediately prioritizing corrective measures toward a re-establishment of the I-95 system to fully function as the interstate link. To allow it to remain typically saturated by local traffic will be to have it suffer the same demise as Rt. 40, Kirkwood Highway, Rt. 202, etc. (3) A separate resolution required the State to forbid use of State owned properties, specifically Parks, for waste spray disposal.

Often, issues and resolutions lie beyond the County's responsibility, particularly, when the County continues a course for which they know in all likelihood they will never pay. They leave it to the Feds, the State, or our grandchildren. My deep concern is that multiple government units scramble for the same resources, each believing they should receive the same as others, yet each fails to be financially responsible. This is a hodgepodge - not coordinated - planning. Local residents suddenly realize the increased taxes they are about to bear are not only to correct substantial defaults on systems that were designed to accomplish a goal and misused, but they are paying for premium costs in administration. Welcoming more residential growth without requiring that it pay for itself can only further diminish an inadequate infrastructure. .

This author, believing that county governments in Delaware are, for the long term, financially ill equipped, believes severe measures must be taken, prior to a substantial increase in user fees so that most infrastructure can be built and properly maintained in order to retain the land planning mandate of sustainable growth. Places must be made to work well between long established incorporated municipalities, and, certainly, for New Castle County's suburbs, or we face a diminishing quality of life, For the near future, we should consider measures beyond those already espoused by the League:

- ◆ Beyond critical interstate commerce improvements, with first prioritization of State funds to improve access to the interstate highway system, (and control local traffic), encourage the economic viability and commercial expansion of our port, air, and rail networking capabilities to include enhanced facilities at Claymont, Dover, Wilmington and New Castle County. For the Ports, it may mean dredging. Historically, economic opportunity (with our English ancestors seeing a solution to population growth) is why we are here. It was not due to Delaware being a tourist attraction.