

News

City planner position confirmed; first budget talks heated

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By PATRICK H. DONGES, The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — On Tuesday night, the City Council voted 4-1 to approve Mayor Scott Johnson's proposal to fill the unfilled principal planner position.

Commissioner of Finance Ken Ivins Jr. was the only council member to vote against the proposal.

The planner post has been vacant since March when Jackie Hakes resigned to take a position as a project manager at Saratoga Springs-based Elan Planning and Design.

Hakes, the first person to hold the position after a 2007 restructuring of the planning department, made \$64,583.32 in her last full year with the city. Johnson told the council that the salary for the position would increase to as much as \$67,000.

"It is a complicated position," he said, "so complicated and important that to leave it unfilled and distribute services throughout the department does not do it a service, or the city.

"The strain of our city will be placed upon us if we do not have in place the personnel and policies that can address the added demands that will come upon us," Johnson said, citing the development of GlobalFoundries' Fab 8 plant in Malta as a sign of future development.

While voting to approve the hire, Accounts Commissioner John Franck requested a meeting with the mayor and the planning department to discuss the utilization of software received over the years through grants his office applied for.

"I believe there's a lot of efficiencies that we have in software from grants that I don't believe have been properly utilized," he said.

Johnson agreed that while some software may currently be underutilized, many programs purchased for the department are being used to increase efficiency. He added that he would accept any suggestions for greater efficiency within the department.

"I'm not real comfortable filling it at this particular point in time," said Ivins, who agreed that while there was a need for professional planning, the city was facing a tough budget season in the months ahead.

"We're possibly looking at cutting other positions to put this one in place," he said.

Ivins faced a harsh reception from Public Works Commissioner Anthony "Skip" Scirocco during his customary

discussion of city finances when he announced he was requesting a 10 percent reduction from departmental spending for the 2011 budget.

"There's no way I'm going to cut 10 percent out of my budget," Scirocco said while questioning Ivins' reports and asking why the council could not receive audited data on yearly revenue before putting a budget in place.

Ivins responded that he had been reporting the numbers on sales as they came in, and that some figures for the year were not calculated until after the final quarter of the previous year.

"What comfort level are you at with raising property tax?" Ivins challenged.

"I didn't hear anybody complain about that," Scirocco responded, noting that the city increased property taxes 7.8 percent last year.

In other business:

-- The council voted unanimously to lock in rates for electricity and natural gas at

7.76 cents per kilowatt hour and 77.5 cents per therm, respectively, for the rest of the year.

-- Public hearings for the city's capital budget program for 2011-2016 were set for 6:45 p.m. Aug. 3 before the regularly scheduled council meeting; 12:30 p.m.

Aug. 11 in the council chamber; and at 6:45 p.m. Aug. 17 before the council meeting.

The next city council meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Aug. 3 in the council chamber of City Hall.

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