

Council Compromise

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It took three votes -- but the Muscatine City Council reached a compromise solution Friday night in deciding how to fund the city's share of joint communications.

"Government is about compromising -- for everybody." With those words, Muscatine At Large Council Member Osama Shihadeh took a lead role during Friday night's budget review session toward a compromise that resulted in a solution for funding Muscatine's share of joint communications -- and in finalizing the city's budget for the next fiscal year. The proposed budget that had been prepared by city staff was based on implementing an Emergency Management Levy to raise 322 thousand dollars to pay Muscatine's joint communications -- or Muscom -- commitment -- and the city's contribution to the Muscatine Office of Disaster Services. But Shihadeh and Council Members Bob Howard, Bob Bynum, and Jerry Lange opposed the new levy from the outset of the budget review process, which meant gleaning the proposed budget to find 322 thousand dollars in possible cuts. The four Council Members presented a list of nearly 328 thousand dollars in possible cuts during Monday night's budget review session, but City Administrator A.J. Johnson and City Finance Director Nancy Lueck explained that many of those proposed cuts were untouchable. The four presented an updated list Friday night of nearly 285 thousand dollars in cuts. Shihadeh said the cuts wouldn't harm the safety and security of the community, but he asked Johnson and Lueck to share their expertise on what impact the cuts might have. Shihadeh said he would not vote for establishing the full 322 thousand dollar levy -- but in the spirit of compromise, he was willing to accept a partial levy combined with substantial budget cuts.

But it wasn't easy getting to a final decision. First, the council rejected a motion made by First Ward Council Member Phil Fitzgerald to implement the full 322 thousand dollar levy with the four opposition votes coming from Shihadeh, Howard, Bynum, and Lange. Next, the council on the same four to three vote rejected Fitzgerald's motion to adopt 215 thousand dollars in cuts identified by Johnson and to adopt a tax levy to make up the balance. Finally, the council unanimously approved Howard's motion to adopt Johnson's cuts, establish a one hundred thousand dollar levy, and make up the difference by reducing the General Fund Balance from one-point-five million dollars to one million, 480 thousand. Fitzgerald says he realizes the new levy is a new tax, but he says it gives the council some time to consider the matter before the next budget review cycle. In his words -- "That's compromise."

Johnson's biggest cut is a reduction of the Equipment Replacement fund from two hundred thousand to 75 thousand dollars. Shihadeh, Howard, Bynum, and Lange had suggested cutting 46 thousand, five hundred dollars from travel and education, but Johnson's suggestions included very few of those cuts. Fifth Ward Council Member Dyann Roby commented her experience as Muscatine Postmaster taught her that training is very important -- and she opposes cutting just for the sake of reducing costs.

At Large Council Member Jerry Lange waited several seconds before casting his vote in the unanimous final decision. He had said he was opposed to any new tax, but in the end he decided the compromise solution was the best for everyone.

Even though he made the motion that broke the deadlock, At Large Council Member Bob Howard said he wasn't totally satisfied with the result, but he adds it's time to accept the compromise and move on.

The council is taking steps to encourage play at the Municipal Golf Course. Rounds have continued to be down -- and revenue has continued to drop. The 256 thousand fund balance fell to 82 thousand dollars in 2002 because of the Water Hole Renovation Project. The fund balance bounced back moderately to 34 thousand dollars in 2006, but the disastrous fire that destroyed a maintenance shed last May 31st left the fund balance 38 thousand dollars in the hole at the end of the last fiscal year. A fund balance of only fourteen hundred dollars is expected when the current fiscal year ends June Thirtieth. The proposed budget for the next fiscal year calls for a new rate schedule to go into effect with the beginning of the upcoming golf season. The weekday rate for eighteen holes will go from sixteen dollars to seventeen dollars for adults and fourteen to fifteen dollars for seniors. It will remain at eleven dollars for juniors -- with kids day on Thursdays remaining at five dollars. But the City Council during Friday night's budget review session altered the proposed weekend and holiday rates to encourage more play -- and over concerns about higher rates driving golfers away. The weekend eighteen hole rate for adults, seniors, and juniors had been eighteen, sixteen, and thirteen dollars. The new schedule called for nineteen dollars across the board. The council voted to retain the increase at nineteen dollars for adults but to reduce the new fees for seniors and juniors to seventeen and fourteen dollars after Parks and Recreation Director Rich Klimes agreed to keeping junior rates as low as possible. Season passes are also going up, except for the junior rate -- which will remain at 160 dollars for the third season in a row. And a new family pass will be implemented this season at a cost of 875 dollars. At Large Council Member Osama Shihadeh commented the upcoming season will be the first full season with the city instead of the golf pro receiving proceeds from clubhouse operations -- and it will be interesting to evaluate how that goes.

The council also took a renewed look at boat harbor operations -- and adopted a new schedule for boat slip rentals.

Second Ward Council Member Marie Press suggested tougher enforcement and steeper fines for motorists who park on city streets but fail to move their vehicles.

And City Finance Director Nancy Lueck reported she's discovered the city can save three hundred thousand dollars over a six year period by refinancing certain debt.