

# Muscatine Journal

## Cutbacks before tax levy is the right thing to do

By the Muscatine Journal editorial board

Members of the Muscatine City Council have been putting in extra hours, giving shape to the city's budget for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1. A public hearing, which must be held before the budget can be approved, is tentatively scheduled for March 6.

A key point for debate during the budgeting season has been how the city will pay for its portion of MUSCOM, Muscatine County's joint communication system that is responsible for emergency-dispatch service and other public safety communications. Currently, the city pays 45 percent of MUSCOM costs and the county pays 55 percent, an arrangement that taxes Muscatine property owners twice for the service – once when they pay city taxes and once when they pay county taxes.

We can only speculate about what Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine and the other anti-tax patriots who founded this country would say about such an arrangement. But we know what its critics on the City Council have said, and we agree with them: It's not fair.

The city leaders would have liked their colleagues in county government to adopt a countywide levy for MUSCOM. Such a plan would have equalized how much property taxpayers in the county contribute to MUSCOM regardless of where they live in the county. It would have reduced Muscatine taxpayers' annual contribution from a proposed \$629,598 to \$422,628 while increasing how much others paid.

"They say, 'It's the fair thing to do, we're agreeing (with) that, but we're not going to do it,'" At-large Councilman Osama Shihadeh said of the County Board of Supervisors, which declined to adopt the countywide tax.

The county's unwillingness to bring equity to an unfair set up and its failure to adopt such a tax has left the city to consider primarily two options:

n Implementing an emergency management levy of 46 cents per \$1,000 of property valuation to raise the \$402,638 Muscatine will have to contribute next year for MUSCOM. Some on the Council have said the levy is needed to avoid taking the money from the city's general fund, which, among other things, would mean not having money to buy cars, computers and other equipment. It could also mean cutting back on city staff or not filling vacant positions.

n Making due without some new equipment and training next year, cutting back on travel expenses and not filling one vacant job to avoid implementing the levy.

At-Large Councilman Bob Howard has been one of the more vocal supporters for making cuts in the city's budget. He has been joined by 3rd Ward Councilman Jerry Lange, 4th Ward Councilman Bob Bynum and Shihadeh.

It would be easy for his critics to question Howard's motives. A Republican, he plans to challenge Rep. Nathan Reichert, D-Muscatine, later this year for a seat in the Iowa Legislature. And it might not help his political ambitions to create a new tax on his constituents in Muscatine.

We say that looking long and hard at budget cutbacks before considering a new levy is the right thing to do. It's what a business owner would do. It's what many hardworking people have already done in response to rising costs to heat their homes and put food on their tables.

That's not to say we like the idea, for example, of cutting an already tight budget. And Mayor Dick O'Brien is right that such a decision could create an even bigger problem for the city next year.

For that reason, we strongly encourage the Council to make cuts to the city budget only for the upcoming fiscal year. We hope that the Council and other community leaders in Muscatine can convince the County Board in the

next 12 months to adopt a countywide tax to fund MUSCOM. That is a better long-term solution.

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