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DARIEN TIMES

Town budget: Selectmen reign in costs, not progress

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Selectmen inched toward adopting their 2006-07 budget this week, meeting over the weekend and on Tuesday night to traverse such financial ground as department staffing levels and new capital expenditures.

At a Saturday meeting, heads of the Planning & Zoning, Parks & Recreation, public works and police departments, along with the fire marshal's office, outlined where they stand with regard to personnel, and how an increased reliance on technology is helping them to meet increased demand without hiring extra workers.

"People are demanding more and more," said town Administrative Officer John Cray, but "our staffing is flat." Cray cited new software programs, like the CityView application suite being implemented by the Planning & Zoning Department, which will enable municipal agencies to extract more productivity out of the same number of workers.

"Technology doesn't allow us to cut staff," said Parks & Recreation Director Susan Swiatek. "Technology allows us to meet demand without hiring extra staff." Swiatek cited the E-Connect software being employed by her department to provide online registration for its seasonal recreation programs. This year, Swiatek said, "there are 54 new families at Tokeneke School." She added that that number means at least 54 new requests for tennis lessons. Allowing prospective Pete Sampras to register online saves the Parks & Recreation Department a lot of time, said Swiatek, and increases revenue by attracting customers who might otherwise miss deadlines.

Selectman Barbara Thorne followed up this theme. This year, she told *The Darien Times*, the town has seen "enormous increases in demand for services." New technology is a way for Darien to keep up with this demand while keeping staff head counts low.

Holding head counts steady, however, is not free. The Planning & Zoning Department, for example, has requested \$39,445 this year to implement its CityView software package. Software costs for P&Z in the 2005-06 budget, by contrast, were \$3,804.

Cray stressed that the Planning & Zoning software upgrades will have applications in other public departments as well. In addition to P&Z, "the prime departments that are going to benefit" from the CityView program are the Town Assessor's office and the Building Department, Cray said. The administrative officer said that \$18,000 of the 40,000 figure is for getting Town Hall staff up to speed on the new system. We have a "ton of people going through training" right now, Cray said yesterday. Once the lessons are finished, the per-year costs of CityView will drop to \$14,000.

First Selectman Evonne Klein said she was impressed with how successful selectmen have been this budget season at keeping costs in check. "I think the budget is a tight budget," she told *The Darien Times* yesterday. Klein was quick to add, however, that toeing the line on costs doesn't mean giving up priorities. Selectmen have used the 2006-07 budget as "a roadmap to progress," Klein said, citing such initiatives as better drainage for Heights Road and the town's \$11,000 support of Darien Revitalization Inc.

While the money for Darien Revitalization comes from the operating budget, the Heights Road initiative is one of the 55 projects included in the 2006-07 capital expenditure plan, a budget which totals \$3.5 million as proposed. Just under \$2 million of that money will come from the pockets of Darien taxpayers, while \$1.17 million — the cost of the Heights Road project — is to be financed by selling bonds.

When asked if she thought the Board of Finance would approve of that debt, along with a 5.92 percent increase in spending, Klein struck a confident note.

This year's budget, she said, should be "one of the easiest budgets they'll ever have."

Selectman Susan Young agreed. Shaping the town budget for the upcoming fiscal year, she said, has been a "very responsible process." In a reference to the passel of finance board members present at all town budget meetings so far, Young was confident of that prudence. "The Board of Finance," she said, "has seen the justification for costs."

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