

Opinion

SATURDAY

JUNE 21, 2008

Morris Twp. must do better on budget

BY JEFF GRAYZEL

This was the first Morris Township budget in which I have participated.

Last year, the budget was completed prior to my taking office on May 16, so I did not participate in the process of producing last year's budget.

While I appreciate all the time the budget committee, consisting of Committeemen Rick Watson and Scott Rosenbush, put into preparing this budget, I do not think the tough decisions were made to deliver significant reductions in spending. Not a single significant cut was made in this budget versus last year. Not a single significant one.

All around us corporate America is getting more efficient. It is doing more with less. Technology has enabled workers to be more productive.

I think that we should have examined our headcount more thoroughly across all of our departments. In order to better understand how each individual department operates, I had personally asked for justifications for headcounts in certain departments. This request was then expanded to all department heads. But what the township committee got back was more of a task list or duty list than a true justification. So more work still needs to be done to better understand where we are properly staffed and where we are not.

The reality of the times is that costs are going up and state aid is going down. So here in Morris Township, we must get better at what we do. We must do things more efficiently, and we must try to do it at lower cost. Some of these changes I propose would include more job sharing across departments, shifting headcount from overstuffed areas to those areas that are in need and possible headcount reductions through attrition.

I recognize that when employees hear some of this they worry about their jobs. But my message is that quality of work, productivity and professional development should also guide how we staff and organize, and how we structure our compensation plan. We cannot stay in the past and consider only tenure and cost of living.

At our public budget work session two weeks ago, Committeeman Ron Goldberg made several comments about the compensation system we use. I followed up with my own comments about how we compensate our employees, and made a suggestion about how we might operate going forward. While we appreciate all the hard work our municipal employees do, we need a better way to reward those who excel or put in extra time on the job.

Goldberg has requested that we bring in a human resources consultant to take a look at our compensation plans, and I look forward to getting that feedback in the next few months.

In this budget, there is at least one change that would have been a step in the right direction. And that is holding pay increases for noncontract employees to the 3.5 percent they have received each year since 2006, and not increasing the retroactive pay to 3.85 percent.

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Moving forward, I would like to stress that next year we need to have an improved budgeting process. Two weeks ago, we had our only group "working session," which was held only because of a request by Goldberg — and it was a good one. It is my understanding that this was possibly the first budget work session ever held publicly in this municipality.

I am pleased that we did this, but it came far too late in the budget process for it to be truly effective. Next year this work session needs to be done earlier in the process, and we will probably need to have more than one.

Consistent with my comments, I did not find in this budget any meaningful movement towards operating more efficiently in our municipality. I cannot accept this document as a planning tool for operating our municipality, and that is why I voted against the budget.

Jeff Grayzel, a Democrat, sits on the Morris Township Committee.