

Attack on tax increase

Downtown residents lead protest; over 2,000 signatures on petitions

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Angry words flew at Jersey City's recent City Council meetings in light of the city's ballooning \$507 million budget and the 24 percent property tax hike approved by the council in January to help balance said budget.

Residents are not taking the situation quietly.

Recently, Amy Ertel, a downtown Jersey City homeowner, along with a group of volunteers, circulated a petition asking Gov. Christopher Christie to look at Jersey City's rising property taxes. The letter and petition sheets with over 2,000 signatures were then submitted to City Clerk Robert Byrne.

A similar petition package was sent to Gov. Christie's office in Trenton on Feb. 25. The petitioners are still accepting signatures.

“For many, including the city, it will be a disaster.” – Amy Ertel

The council introduced the \$507 million municipal budget for 2009-2010 at their Jan. 13 meeting. The budget, which covers the current fiscal year ending June 30, is up \$32 million over 2008-2009. It asks the public to contribute more than \$195 million in taxes, up \$44 million over last year. To cover that increase in the tax levy, Jersey City homeowners with property assessed at \$100,000 saw an increase of \$800 in their 2010 first quarter tax bill, which was due last month.

At the council's Jan. 27 meeting, the council voted to exceed the state-imposed budget spending limit of 4 percent increase over the year before. The \$32 million jump is approximately a 7 percent increase.

The council is still looking for cuts to get the budget under the 4 percent cap, and to

provide for a possible property tax decrease. The final budget may be passed before the end of March.

In the meantime, Ertel and thousands of residents are waiting for an answer from the state to see if Gov. Christie will intercede in any future tax increase.

Stopping a taxing situation

Ertel, in her letter to Christie, said the city's attempts at cost-cutting are "cosmetic" and "grossly inadequate."

So far, the city has carried out unpaid furloughs of a day here and a day there for full-time city employees. Most recently, the city laid off 279 seasonal and provisional employees for savings that total a little over \$3 million.

Also, the city has closed fire stations and reassigned personnel. And city officials are discussing more layoffs that would take place before the fiscal year ends on June 30.

But the combined savings will barely make a dent in a budget shortfall conservatively estimated at \$42 million.

Ertel also wrote in her letter about how the council (with the exception of council members Steven Fulop and Viola Richardson) rejected several resolutions introduced by Fulop to cut costs, including: Eliminating health benefits for board members at the Jersey City Incinerator Authority and the Municipal Utilities Authority as well as for council members, and eliminating city cars for all 39 city employees who receive them. The council instead voted to introduce ordinances by Mayor Jerramiah Healy requiring board members to pay for some of their health benefits, and for a 20 percent reduction in the 39 cars issued to city employees – in other words, reducing eight cars.

"The council failed to take responsibility to make significant changes in how Jersey City does business," Ertel stated in her letter. "The mayor and the council refused to take responsibility for the fiscal and political ineptitude that hallmarks its current leadership."

Ertel also in her letter laid out a bleak future for Jersey City if the 24 percent tax increase is allowed to stand, and any future ones follow.

"Many may leave the state for other states where the aggregate tax burden offers greater affordability and better quality of life," Ertel said. "For many, including the city, it will be a disaster."

To learn more about the tax petition, visit <http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/stop-the-jersey-city-tax-increase.html>.

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