

Council 4-pack cuts nearly \$1.7M from budget proposal

By Ben Meiklejohn

LINCOLN -- At a special meeting held June 22 for the purpose of approving a budget, the Lincoln Town Council voted 4-3 along usual and predictable voting blocks, to gut the town manager's proposed budget by nearly \$1.7 million.

The cuts were made to nearly all department budget lines one at a time, through motions made by Council Vice Chair David Ireland to amend the amounts. Councilors Sheldon Hanington, Lee Rand and Eric Rojo joined Ireland in voting for the cuts, with Council Chair Stephen Clay and Coun-

cilors Cathy Moison and Gordon Street voting against the cuts.

The pack of four councilors have been commonly referred to as "The Four Horsemen" by residents for their propensity to always vote as a block, rarely voting independently of each other.

Interim Town Manager Wade Shaefer, who was hired 4-3 last month after the council fired for-

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mer interim town manager Dennis Bullen days before his probationary period ended, proposed a budget of \$11,589,843. The final amount approved by the council on a 4-3 vote was \$9,906,659.

Among the reductions to Shaefer's proposal that were approved on 4-3 votes:

- Town manager's budget line reduced from \$260,648 to \$185,000.
 - Town clerk's budget reduced from \$260,648 to \$250,000.
 - Finance budget reduced from \$450,382 to \$368,500.
 - Assessing budget reduced from \$75,112 to \$10,000.
 - Police department reduced from \$1,757,143 to \$1,230,210.
 - Fire department reduced from \$2,093,854 to \$1,670,246.
 - Fire station reduced from \$84,700 to \$15,000.
 - Public works reduced from \$1,288,048 to \$1,090,507.
 - Social services and general assistance reduced from \$26,975 to \$15,000.
 - Cemeteries, parks and recreation department reduced from \$315,718 to \$275,000.
 - Airport reduced from \$88,452 to \$80,000.
 - Capital improvement reduced from \$1,101,807 to \$875,000.
- A few budget lines were accepted unchanged, as proposed by Shaefer:
- Code enforcement officer budget, \$75,112.
 - Utilities and municipal services, \$517,590.
 - Transfer station, \$587,690.
 - Landfill, \$1,500.
 - Library, \$192,786.
 - Personnel, \$2,198,891.
 - Debt service, \$268,628.
- Before beginning deliberations

on the budget, several councilors spoke about the budget proposal and past year budgets.

Street addressed the council from the public podium instead of from his seat as a councilor, addressing the several different budget proposals that had been bantered about in recent weeks.

"Only one of them is the official proposal tonight and that's the one that's on the agenda. That's the one pulled together by our interim town manager, Wade Shaefer" Street said. "I should remind you that Wade was not unanimously hired, but he was hired with four votes from you four councilmen -- Hanington, Ireland, Rand and Rojo -- and so you have been campaigning for cutting the budget 10%, if not more, and I kind of implore you to notice that the person you hired ended up coming up with the most expensive budget of the four proposals, increasing spending by 2.1% and that's after he talked with everybody and has gotten more data than probably any of the rest of us."

Street compared four budget proposals -- the town manager's proposed budget, the budget committee's proposed budget, a proposal by Councilor Cathy Moison to accept the town manager's budget with a hiring freeze and Ireland's proposal, which would reduce the budget 12.4%.

Street said Ireland's proposal is "the most drastic of the four proposals."

"So that one went 2.5% further than the 10% you were shooting for ... I am concerned that none of these budgets keep up with inflation."

Street said prices in Maine have

risen faster than the national average and energy prices are up 26.5% in the past year.

Hanington said when he first was elected to the council, the town had a part-time police chief and a much smaller police department.

"And then we voted to buy two SUVs. We also voted to buy two new officers because it was said that we would have to have overtime," Hanington said. "I don't care if we had six more officers, six more EMTs. By doing that, by expanding government, we're going to have to hire someone else to help with vacations, cover the sick time, so it's probably a snowball effect, and to be honest with you, since I moved to Lincoln 20 years ago, if we would have compounded the budget 5% each and every year, the actual true budget would probably be around \$8.2 million and I'm going to advocate next year, we may have to even look at it even more ..."

"It don't set well with me to think that we're squeezing (taxpayers) to the point where 1.25% of the people in Lincoln that are employed here by us that are making double and triple the income of the average citizen."

"I have a good friend of mine that works 60 hours a week at three convenient stores, just trying to put food on the table, so I am very sympathetic."

Rojo said, "I think it's very important that everybody sees and understands that what we're trying to do is fix the mistakes of several town councils for many years to allow the previous town manager to run things on his own, spending like crazy, there was no control, all the budgets were passed."

Rojo questioned whether the training the town pays for police and other staff are necessary.

"What are we paying to train? We keep on paying wonderfully to train a lot of people, but I don't know whether the positions really require that extra training we're paying for," he said. "So there's a lot of things we need to reel in, in order to protect the people of Lincoln that cannot afford to live in Lincoln."

When discussion of the first department budget line — the town manager's budget line — came up, and after Ireland moved to reduce the line to \$185,000, Street said, "That would be a decrease from the current year budget 29.4% and I think that's pretty drastic.

"As it is, I think \$204,587 does not include enough if we were to lose our town manager because he's agreed to work for \$70,000. I don't think we could get another town manager for that money, so I think that we really ought to have it larger."

Shaefer asked the council not to reduce the line item, saying, "I would highly recommend that you pass the budget for the manager's one in the anticipation of looking for a manager down the road. I'm not saying that I want to leave, but I do have other responsibilities that I really enjoy doing, and as much as I like this — I enjoy the people I work with in this so far — but it is not the calling that God has in my life, so I would encourage you to think about that as you're working on this budget."

When Street raised similar concerns about cutting the finance budget, when the town has yet to hire a treasurer, Hanington suggested that the council, like the Legislature does with supplemental budgets in the fall, could simply issue supplemental tax bills at a later date if the council found that it needed more money.

"Even though we make these cuts right now, I'm sure within the next 30 days, we can come to the table and say look, 'We need to be fiscally conservative on some of these little areas and I think that's something that probably we can do as a council because we do it as a state, we do it as a federal government.

"It's called a supplemental budget, so coming out of this, even though we're shaving a million plus, we could also come back and say we need an X amount of dollars for this or an X amount of dollars for that.

"... We're going to have to...put our nose to the grindstone and say, 'Look, let's find it,' because when you have a department head that says that one thing, 'I can't save 10%' but two weeks later, they spend that 10%, there's always money under a rock."

Street replied, "I have a lot of rocks in my yard. I don't think there's any money under any of them. ... One of the things we have as a problem here is that you are comparing how the Legislature does something to how we as a town are allowed to do something. I don't see that we have any authority to go back and change how much we tax people. After

the tax is set, that's what we're stuck with for the year.

"... I know a lot of people in this room who have made the decision to leave because of what is happening with this council trying to cut services. There are quite a number of people who are getting fed up with this and thinking, 'We'd be better off trying to live somewhere else.' I don't want that to be our future. I want this to be a growing town."

During discussion of a reduction of the assessing department from \$75,325 to \$10,000, Street said, "We do not have an assessor right now, we do not have a company to do assessing. How are you going to actually complete the process of billing people for their property taxes and actually get money in to cover these budgets?"

In recent months, Lincoln News has reported on town wide tax assessment inequities, highlighting properties with high-value buildings only getting assessed for land value, homestead exemptions being given twice to the same property owner or for land that has no structure that can be lived in, or buildings that have been improved greatly but still get taxed on an assessment value not commensurate with the improvements.

Former assessor Ruth Birtz told Lincoln News in April that the problem grew bigger and bigger after years of former town manager, Rick Bronson, understaffing and underfunding the assessment department hindering the department's ability to keep up with revising property values.

The town's assessment procedures will be audited by the Maine Revenue Services within the next several weeks.

Ireland said the town has received quotes from assessing firms.

"Several months down the road, we will probably be funding that as a town council," Ireland said. "\$10,000 would be for what it's

going to cost us between now and then."

Ireland did not specify where the funds would come from to pay an assessing firm if the assessing department's budget is only \$10,000.

During a discussion about reducing the general assistance and social services budget from \$26,975 to \$15,000, Street challenged Hanington, saying, "I just would like to point out that this amendment in this budget line is going to, in many times, serve the very people you say you're trying to help, and you just cut it."

Hanington responded, "This just proves how hard people are having it. They need help because a lot of times, they make choices -- not pay the tax or pay the tax and you can't eat or pay the fuel, so you know, I understand where Councilor Street's coming from, but at the end of the day, this also proves the point of what I've been saying."

When the council deliberated the budget for tax increment financing, Birtz pointed out that the various approved reductions simultaneously reduced the amount available in the TIF budget from \$1,578,977 to \$1,152,173, because that budget is based on the millage resulting from the overall budget amount.

The council tabled approval of the TIF budget until the next meeting.

Birtz clarified when asked, "Your decision to table this doesn't af-

fect the TIF budget at all, because this is basically not accurate ... it's not going to have any ramifications if you wait to vote on this."

When the council considered the town manager's proposed revenue budget of \$5,133,761, Street asked, "Did cutting the various departments we have, have an impact on this revenue budget, because we're making a budget that includes things like EMS (revenue)?"

Nobody provided an answer to Street's inquiry. Street said the revenue budget "seems like this is probably an exaggerated budget."

The revenue budget was approved by the council as proposed by the town manager, despite that the council reduced some expenditure lines that are responsible for generating revenue for the town.

On Tuesday, the day after the special town council meeting, Lincoln Police Chief Lee Miller released a press statement.

"I would be less than candid if I did not acknowledge that reducing the department's funding by several hundred thousand dollars from its previous level will present significant challenges in the year ahead," Miller wrote in the release.

"Budget reductions of this magnitude do not happen on paper alone. They affect staffing, training opportunities, supervision, equipment replacement, officer safety and the level of service we can provide to the community.

While I am hopeful we can avoid reducing our current staffing levels, vacant positions will likely remain unfilled for the foreseeable future. This places additional demands on the officers we have and makes it more difficult to continue the progress we have worked so hard to achieve.

"One of the most important investments any police department can make is in its people. Well-trained, properly equipped and adequately staffed officers are better able to serve the public safely and effectively. Maintaining those standards is critical not only for officer safety, but also for the quality of service our community expects and deserves."

Public Works Director George Briggs also released a statement, writing, "We understand that well-maintained roads are more than just a convenience -- they are essential for emergency response, school transportation, local businesses and the daily routines that keep our town thriving ...

"We recognize that budget constraints can make our work more challenging, but they will never diminish our commitment. Even with limited resources, we prioritize essential maintenance, safety repairs and rapid response to hazards. Our crews take pride in finding efficient, innovative solutions to stretch every dollar while maintaining the high standards our community expects.

"Public Works is more than a department -- it is a promise to

our neighbors. We will continue to work tirelessly, in all four seasons, to keep our roads safe, reliable and ready for everyone who calls this town home."

In the immediate aftermath of the council vote Monday night, comments and posts began to populate public social media forums, with several families of Lincoln firefighters indicating that some firefighters will be seeking employment elsewhere.

Fire Capt. Jake Hammond posted that the impact of the cuts to the fire department will result in a reduction of crew from five members per crew, to four.

"Backup has said they'll no longer come here (or if they do, they'll charge the town for their services coming to back us up) because mutual aid is no longer mutual," Hammond posted.

The captain said the five positions that will be let go are firefighters that the town funded to train -- "all funded by the taxpayer and now likely taking the training the Lincoln taxpayers paid for to another department and leaving our crews critically short."

"Council heard these facts for months and still voted 4-3 to cut," he said. "There will be fires that we cannot go interior on. There will be patients at (Penobscot Valley Hospital) that we cannot get to a higher level of care facility. There will be revenue losses to the town of Lincoln. And being a Lincoln firefighter is no longer safe for its employees."

Within hours, residents also began discussing a petition and initiative process to repeal the budget passed by the four councilors, or even initiating a new effort to recall them.

Hanington, Ireland, Rand and Rojo were subjects of an attempted recall effort initiated in May but the deadline to qualify for a recall was June 22 and the requisite number of signatures were not obtained on the petitions, which could not be circulated and could only be signed at the town office during open business hours.

The town council next meets for a special meeting on June 29 to consider staff appointments and to revisit the fire contract with unorganized territory that was tabled last week.



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