

MAYOR'S COLUMN

The Board of Trustees approved the 2009-2010 Village Budget at the April 13 meeting and I am extremely pleased to report that our work resulted in a 0% tax increase. It was a difficult and painstaking process but these are difficult times that require no less an effort. This coming fiscal year we will be asking residents to pay \$7,683,000 in property taxes to fund our Village government.

After many conversations with residents and merchants, the Trustees and I understood quite clearly that taxpayers had reached their limit. Of very immediate concern were our merchants, given the recent spate of empty stores. Even after reevaluation, our merchants pay some of the highest taxes per square foot in Westchester County. As for our residents, with home sales clearly stagnant, the taxes and other carrying costs become even more of a factor in the decision to buy a home in the Village.

The Trustees and I began the budgeting process facing a shortfall of almost one half million dollars on the revenue side of the budget due to decreases in sale tax, mortgage tax and investment income and a major drop in building permit fees.

To overcome this deficit, we had to make cuts in personnel and leave other staffing positions unfunded. We eliminated one library position, one parking enforcement officer position and left unfunded slots in Village Hall administration and the Police and Public Works departments. These personnel changes alone resulted in a savings of almost \$350,000.

To achieve the 0% tax increase, we were determined not to adversely affect the operations of our Police and Public Works Departments so the lion's share of the cost savings had to be found elsewhere.

In our new budget, we were able to fill three police officer slots that became vacant through transfers and retirements, bringing us closer to our full complement of 23 officers.

Our Sanitation Department will continue with the same level of garbage and recycling services. As a sidebar the Village just received notice that we ranked 4th out of 70 plus communities in Westchester County in the percentage of recycled waste products.

To achieve our zero tax levy increase, we also reexamined all of our outstanding capital projects and closed out some that were not absolutely necessary in light of these economic times. We then applied these funds to reduce our debt service costs.

We then examined every line item in our operating budget and asked department heads to justify needs as well as level of funding. All department heads were then asked to make additional reductions even to necessary line items.

Our philosophy throughout was to ensure that maximum benefit of tax dollars went to Village taxpayers who shoulder the financial burden. As a consequence, to generate needed revenue we looked to user fees and not additional property tax levy. We have increased fees for our recreation programs to narrow the gap between user fees and Village subsidy with the eventual goal of self-funding.

We have also raised our parking violation fees for the first time in six years, placing us more in line with neighboring communities. Starting on June 1, meter violation tickets will have a fine of \$20, similar to Scarsdale's and still below Eastchester's \$25 and Yonkers' \$35 penalties. Without the sacrifices and cooperation of our entire Village staff, we could never have reached our goal of a zero increase. Everyone understood the economic realities facing all of us and did their part to keep costs down. For example, our tennis pro of 20 plus years, Mike Virgilio, agreed to a salary freeze and the ladies in Village Hall are collectively absorbing the duties previously assigned to a front desk clerk.

A zero tax levy increase was important to our community in this difficult year. I thank everyone involved for their contribution to this effort. We all hope for a return to better financial times in the coming year.