

Submission to Another Voice, Buffalo News

Having observed Erie County's budget process for several years, the League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara respectfully offers what we hope will be useful observations and recommendations.

First, we commend the county executive and legislators for completing budgets in a timely and collaborative manner. To strengthen the process, we propose an additional public hearing after the legislature has modified the county executive's proposed budget. This would improve transparency and allow citizens to react before a final budget is adopted.

Significant progress in implementing the county's Initiatives for a Smart Economy is also noteworthy; since the League wholeheartedly supports many of these initiatives, we commend this work as well.

Our concern is with the Citizens Budget Review Commission. Because it reflects League values regarding government transparency and public involvement, the commission is of great interest to us. Unfortunately, it seems to be hobbled by several factors that impede fulfillment of its mission.

For example, while the deputy budget director has participated in meetings, the county comptroller has not, nor has he sent a representative. The commission itself does not appear to conduct independent budget reviews. As a result, commissioners receive budget information from only one source.

In addition, the timing of appointments, the steep learning curve and the constraints of one-year terms make it difficult for commissioners to contribute their expertise. Sporadic attendance and lack of continuity preclude meaningful action.

We urge the county to consider the following steps, which we believe would strengthen the commission significantly: Make appointments earlier in the year to assure that the commission is fully formed and ready to work when the budget process begins. Provide an orientation for all members to attend together before their work begins. Appoint members for two years, rather than one, and stagger terms to improve continuity. Reconsider categorical appointments to more accurately reflect the community in terms of gender and ethnicity. Assure that members fully understand their role and the importance of their commitment to attendance and active participation. Establish meeting times well in advance so that members can schedule around them. Last, assign a staff member to provide consistent administrative support, including taking meeting minutes, expediting their distribution, and posting them to the county website.

There is no question that the Citizens Budget Review Commission can be of great value to the county. We will continue to follow its progress.

Finally, we continue to be troubled by the county's over-reliance on sales tax. Falling oil prices and the fluctuating value of the Canadian dollar only exacerbate the problem. We strongly recommend that the county expand other sources of revenue.

We trust that our recommendations will be seriously considered as we all strive to enhance transparency and encourage citizen participation in the Erie County budget process.

Joan T. Parks and Judith M. Metzger, Co-Presidents
Marian Deutschman, Chair Local Government Committee

47 Danbury Lane, Kenmore, NY 14217, 716-876-0184
lwtvoter@verizon.net