Montclair Budget Hearings: Recreation, Fire, Code Enforcement All Present

BY **Steven Maginnis** | SATURDAY, APR 06, 2013 6:17PM | **COMMENTS (9)**

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Montclair Recreation and Cultural Affairs Director Pat Breschka

Five agencies – three public departments and two community educational groups – testified in a Saturday budget hearing session of the Montclair Township Council on April 6. Montclair Township Manager Marc Dashield has arranged for hearings during regularly scheduled council meetings through April 16, but he also proposed this Saturday meeting to accommodate witnesses and accelerate the hearing process. Though the Saturday meeting was also scheduled to make it easier for the general public to attend, there were few residents present.

The three municipal departments testifying on April 6 were the recreation department, the fire department, and the code enforcement office, in that order. Montclair Recreation and Cultural Affairs Director Pat Breschka was the first person to testify during the morning session, requesting no new resources to add to the $744,000 already tentatively budgeted. Dashield noted that Breschka's department runs heavily on volunteer work, and Breschka herself told the council that all of her programs are funded by fees. She testified that her spending plans included upgrading the Essex and Nishuane pools and expanding the senior citizens' programs.

"The problem we have with senior citizen programming," she said, "is we don't have a facility. As you know we use all the schools for all our…youth programs, which are at night. So we're competing with the Board of Ed, so it's tight." She cited that it's hard to find space for senior programs for the day, and she is hoping to use the shelter house at Edgemont Park, with help from the health department and Friends of Edgemont Park to utilize the space. The pools were a top priority for her, because of the revenue that pool badges generate, and she announced a weekday caregiver badge for people taking care of small children and seniors. Breschka also offered up the possibility of staging another First Night in December with the newly restored arts council.

"I would assist them, but not monetarily – don't worry," she laughed.

Fire Chief Kevin Allen reported that he needed to have his budget increased to hire two additional full time firefighters in addition to the seven new firemen he plans to hire to replace firemen who have already retired or are scheduled to retire in the coming months. The Montclair Fire Department has 81 uniformed officers, with a budget for 84; Allen wants 86 in all. The fire department budget for 213 is currently set at 9.9 million, 7.6 million of which is supported by taxpayers' money.

Allen said more firemen would be more cost-efficient and safe than overtime. "I want to have the bodies," he said, "because I believe that if you have less people at fires, more people get hurt." Allen noted the increases of "mutual aid" – firefighters from different towns helping each other – due in part to the smaller force but also due to fewer firemen living in town, but he also endorsed an emphasis on mutual aid and also a movement toward greater shared services, a cause dear to Deputy Mayor Robert Russo's heart. Russo endorsed Allen's efforts in that direction.

Deputy Fire Chief Thomas Diveny, who oversees code enforcement, requested additional funding for new computer software. The code enforcement office is currently budgeted for 2013 at $230,843. Diveny hoped his office could increase efficiency and enforcement,

saying that much of the work in locating the owner of an abandoned or dilapidated property not up to municipal codes takes up a good deal of time. Both Mayor Robert Jackson and Fourth Ward Councilor Renée Baskerville expressed interest in an aggressive effort to do something about the boarded-up storefront in the South End business district, which both feel has been an eyesore for too long.

The Montclair Community Pre-K was the biggest center of attention. Sean Flynn, chairman of the Pre-K's board of trustees, told the council that the school remains committed to providing the best possible pre-kindergarten education to children in Montclair regardless of a family's ability to pay, but he added that budget constraints and inconsistent township support have made it harder. Flynn reported that total revenue for the Montclair Pre-K has decreased from $2.2 million in 2008 to $1.9 million in 2012, a 12 percent drop, with expenses cut by 15 percent ($2.3 million to $1.9 million) in the same period. He added that tuition revenue has dropped in the past four years even the school has had to increase tuition fees.

Sean Flynn, chairman of the Montclair Community Pre-K Board of Trustees

Flynn blamed the council under Mayor Jerry Fried for the decline in support, but Councilor Baskerville, the only re-elected Fried council holdover, begged to differ, insisting that the previous council looked for many alternative means of support.

"When we were at a crossroads and seriously in the height of the economic decline, I spent many hours trying to bring people to the table, from the Pre-K, from the Head Start program, from the neighborhood child care program," she said, "trying to see what we could do to utilize the best resources."

Baskerville recalled one suggestion she made, a proposal suggesting that the Pre-K could start a breakfast program to receive federal funding and thus get more resources, but the Pre-K said it didn't have the ability to do so. "Certainly I would have viewed that situation as perhaps lack of flexibility at that time on the [part of] Montclair Community Pre-K to consider anything out of their comfort zone. "

The Montclair Community Pre-K is currently requesting $255,000 in funding for 2013 to cover 14 percent of their expenses, the rest from tuition and fundraising. The Pre-K is willing to work with the council and the Board of Education to evaluate other means but needs immediate funding for current obligations to its children.

The council overall was sympathetic to supporting the Pre-K, a marked contrast from the contentious sparring over the funding for 2012 in the previous council. "The money that we spend on early childhood education pays itself off so much more once these kids reach middle school and high school," Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller said. "We're going to be looking at this issue very closely."

Suzy Kass of the Adult School of Montclair (ASM) represented the other end of the educational spectrum. She laid out a three-year plan for ASM to be financially independent within three years. She said that school will assess community needs and try to respond to offering courses that meet student interests as well develop an aggressive fundraising capability and upgrade its computer software. The ASM is requesting $160,000 for 2013, followed by $120,000 for 2014 and $80,000 for 2015, to implement its plans. Both Councilor Spiller and Mayor Jackson suggested that the ASM look at its fees and structure them to demands more from non-residents.

"Our mission is to reach a broad array of need, so we really try to keep our costs modest," Kass said. "We like the idea of keeping our cost structure somewhat sound for everyone, because we want people to feel that Montclair is an aspirational place, a place where they want to come to because it's such an interesting place to be." She said she didn't want to freeze out non-residents, but both Mayor Jackson and Councilors Spiller, said that, with Montclair residents paying ASM fees on top of tax money to support the school, it was only fair that non-residents ought to pay a fee reflecting that same aggregate cost.