

Cultural, anti-violence fund OK'd

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Arts and cultural groups and organizations working to combat violence in the City of Buffalo will share \$200,000 in grants under a spending plan approved Friday that contains only minor changes from what was proposed by Mayor Byron W. Brown.

City lawmakers unanimously ratified a budget for the 2012-13 fiscal year that establishes a “cultural and anti-violence fund” as part of an overall \$482.6 million spending package.

While the specific process for deciding which groups get the funding has not been established, Brown said he believes it will be a collaboration between the legislative and executive branches.

Brown, who thanked Council members for their cooperation, said he does not plan to issue any veto regarding the budget adopted by the Council.

This is the first time since 2001 where the city has provided operational funding as part of its regular budget process, said Tod A. Kniazak, executive director of the Arts Services Initiative of Western New York.

“That’s a big step forward,” said Kniazak, who said last year’s city funding was provided on an emergency basis after some groups saw their funding from Erie County eliminated.

The arts and anti-violence funding was part of a small package of changes negotiated between the Common Council and the administration, each of which provided \$100,000 for the new grant fund.

“It’s not a lot of money, but it’s a good start,” Delaware Council Member Michael

J. LoCurto said of the arts funding.

Ellicott Council Member Darius G. Pridgen called the new funding for anti-violence groups “much needed.”

“I believe that it would be much worse if it were not for the hundreds of men and women” who work with gangs and spend nights on the streets trying to help the situation, Pridgen said.

The new budget, which goes into effect July 1, contains an 8.5 percent cut in the commercial property tax rate, and holds the line on the residential property tax rate.

The spending plan also includes no increase in garbage user fees, but water rates will go up.

Also as part of the budget amendments passed by the Council, job titles for aides in two Council district offices were changed, with corresponding salaries increasing. In the last budget, the Masten and South offices were not paying aides as much as was called for in the budget, Council President Richard A. Fontana said.

Discretionary spending for Council members also was reduced to \$115,000 from \$120,000 in the new spending plan. Brown's proposed budget initially pegged discretionary spending at \$110,000 per Council office.

The mayor, Niagara Council Member David A. Rivera and North Council Member Joseph Golombek Jr. all noted the lack of controversy seen in this year's budget process.

Golombek called it "one of least contentious budget processes I've ever been a part of."

Rivera said it was "one of the most civil budgets" he'd been a part of, adding the budget is "fiscally conservative."

Lawmakers also praised Finance Commissioner Janet Penksa and Budget Director Donna Estrich for their work.

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