

At county budget hearing, embellishments accompany pleas

BY: Denise Jewell Gee

11/20/2012



Music and poetry filled the County Legislature chambers Monday as speakers urged lawmakers not to scale back funding for arts and cultural groups, libraries and youth programs next year.

A county budget hearing that drew more than 50 speakers was dominated by members of local nonprofit organizations who asked lawmakers to keep the \$5.5 million that County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz has proposed for local arts and cultural groups in the 2013 spending plan. “We have in this community theaters, museums, music venues, churches, etc., but these are just buildings,” said Charles T. Peszynski, president of the Polish Arts Club of Buffalo. “Without the cultural organizations that populate and enliven them, they’re empty shells. We would be a community without a soul.”

Poloncarz proposed a \$1.38 billion budget that would raise the property tax rate by 3.4 percent, cut 63 mostly vacant jobs and use surplus funds to balance the budget. He has described the proposed tax increase as necessary to maintain popular services such as county libraries and youth programs, despite declining revenue and rising expenses next year.

Legislators will spend the next two weeks hashing out their own changes to the proposed budget, and a majority of the members of the 11-member Legislature have said they would like to work toward eliminating the tax hike.

But what they heard Monday night was speaker after speaker – some embellishing their remarks with poetry and singing – who asked legislators not to cut funding for cultural, libraries and youth programs as they finalize the budget.

“The public library system, it’s been cut enough,” said Gary Earl Ross, board chairman and resident playwright at Ujima Theatre Company. “The arts community, it’s not a matter of the money, as much as it is a matter of quality of life.”

The 2½-hour hearing covered a range of topics – from support for the county’s rat-control program to a request for adequate funding to fix roads and bridges.

Two speakers urged lawmakers to find a way to reduce the proposed tax increase. “As I look

at the newspaper and listen to the TV news during these budget discussions, the same few areas are listed for reductions,” said Jolene M. Jeffe, supervisor of the Town of Aurora. “It includes the usual – what I call ‘political footballs’ – that get the residents fired up, including the library, cultural, road patrol and parks, among others. Yet there are at least 43 departments listed in the table of contents of this budget.”

Jeffe pleaded with the county executive and the Legislature to look at all of the departments to find savings.

Several speakers also expressed concern that the 2013 proposed budget would cut funding for an early childhood initiative known as Success by 6. The program, which provides training, mentoring and other help for early child care providers, received \$98,192 through the county budget in recent years but would lose that money next year because of changes in federal grant funding.

“I ask you to envision what our community would be like without Success by 6,” said Lynn A. Pullano, education director for the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County. “The results might be suspensions by 6, absences by 8, school dropouts by senior high and eventually perpetual poverty. We can invest in Success by 6 today, or we can pay later.”

<http://www.buffalonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20121120/CITYANDREGION/121129973/1010>