

October override backers feel sting over Templeton shortfall news

Even in the midst of the Christmas season, Templeton once again finds itself embroiled in a budget fiasco that should cause town officials to stop pointing fingers and own up to this latest mess.

Having successfully convinced the taxpayers to support a \$620,000 override last October, under the auspice that it would protect emergency services in the town, it was learned recently that the town is actually an additional \$505,000 in the red.

The options, as offered by a consultant last week during a Board of Selectmen's meeting, cover varying degrees of the unpalatable, from asking for another override, which selectman Kenn Robinson admitted that "the chances of us getting another override are nonexistent," to tapping what's left of the town's free cash, or even finding where other cuts could be made to make the numbers work.

The news of this latest shortfall in particular distressed Police Chief David Whitaker.

"The (police) department put their reputations on the line when we went out for the override," said the chief. "To find out now (about this shortfall) when we put our credibility out there, it affects the credibility of the town."

Making it particularly challenging for the town's officials to find a workable solution is that after years of cutting, finding anything of significance to slash from the budget is not realistic, especially after a 12 percent reduction from the fiscal 2012 budget having been implemented for this current fiscal year.

ON FURTHER REVIEW



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Therefore, it would seem that once again using free cash would be the "best" option, but upon recognizing how lean Templeton's reserves have become, bleeding even more from them should be a last option. Especially considering that for fiscal 2012, the town had to sap \$686,628 from free cash and \$212,126 in stabilization funds just to balance that year's budget, according to town accountant Fred Aponte, as noted on Pauly's Templeton Watch

blog.

In light of Templeton's tough situation, Whitaker admitted that "it's hard to get the town to support the department heads now, as we don't know what the cuts are going to be, but I will guess they will be very serious."

As troublesome as the cuts could be for the police, Whitaker envisions that they will be far reaching when town officials work to close the budget gap.

"It will be a devastating impact on the police services, but other services as well," he noted. "We put ourselves out there (for the last override)...this is very disheartening and very frustrating."

Unfortunately for Templeton, covering a year's budget gap by way of free cash has been habit akin to that of an addiction, with the practice of dipping into free cash ranging from \$380,007 to \$784,151 each fiscal year dating back to 2006, according to Aponte, as spelled out on the blog.

It's no wonder that the town was downgraded by Moody's Investment Services in August for a "deteriorating financial position," which Selectman Julie Farrell acknowledged then meant that "now it costs us more to borrow." Not only was the town downgraded, but it also was projected to have a "nega-

tive outlook," in large part because of its diminished reserves.

To see the last year that the town did not use free cash or stabilization funds to balance the budget, one has to go back to 2005. But even then, the only reason that no free cash was used to balance the budget was because it failed to certify the tax rate in time, to allow for free cash use.

With that sort of history, and knowing that a maximum increase of 2 1/2 percent on the levy limit would only cover less than half the current deficit, the math doesn't add up to the town under its current tax structure of ever being able to get out of this trap of using free cash to fill its annual budget hole.

When pressed about why the town is in such a financial tough spot, selectman Farrell admitted on the blog that "the town should have been raising the tax rate instead of keeping it artificially low by using free cash and stabilization to balance the budget." But instead of taking responsibility over that failure, it wasn't long before Farrell reverted to a tired mantra spoken by some in the town, dredging up old history as the "evidence" to why Templeton finds itself in this latest tough situation.

Bemoaning the town's "pattern of deliberate mismanagement," Farrell redirected blame towards former town officials who have long been out of office.

To really crank up the Way Back Machine, Ms. Farrell wrote at length about a Department of Revenue report from October 2009 as proof to why the town is in the red.

In much the same way, Republicans nationally were legitimately frustrated and incensed over the incessant "blame Bush" replies by some Americans whenever President Barack Obama stumbled over a problem — even into his second term. There's a time when one has to step up and acknowledge that the "buck stops here," in the words of another president, Harry S. Truman.

At least selectman Jeffrey Bennett wasn't looking too far back in history for blame, admitting the problem resulted from "someone cop(ying off of someone else's homework and their homework was wrong." For this to be discovered a couple of months after the last override request, though, should at least be disconcerting to any and all Templeton taxpayers, for it not being discovered earlier.

With the police department having successfully staved off

cuts to its force during the last shortfall fight, this latest news clearly has frustrated department leadership, as Whitaker said "I'm beside myself about it," adding that "I suspect there might be severe cuts within all the departments." The chief acknowledged that he doesn't see "an easy fix," and is hoping for a "gradual fix, but I think it will take three to four years before we get out of the woods."

Where town officials go from here is still unknown, as Whitaker noted that "we haven't met yet" with officials, expecting the matter to be discussed shortly after the new year.

In the meantime, the board opted for the short-term fix of freezing discretionary expenses and hiring, which only provides a temporary breather to the flow of red ink.

When it comes time to sit down and deal with this latest shortfall, though, it would be best for town officials to work at being less interested in passing the buck, accept blame for this mess that arose under their watch, and in the end work to serve in the town's best interests.

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