

Council to Adopt 2008 City Operating Budget

News Release

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New Orleans, LA - November 29, 2007 - After a month-long review of the City of New Orleans Operating Budget, the City Council is expected to formally adopt the 2008 Budget at its regular meeting beginning Friday morning.

The budget to be approved by the Council is expected to reflect support, guidance and authorization of a stepped-up recovery but will differ from the Nagin Administration's budget blueprint as presented on November 1st.

The City Council's action will reaffirm a council resolution passed late last summer to not roll forward property tax millage rates, making certain that an undue financial burden is not placed on taxpayers. The Council stated its position that it did not intend to roll forward property tax millages last summer after it received preliminary estimates indicating that the total value of assessed property within the city had substantially increased.

The Council is required by the Louisiana Constitution to adjust millage rates downward to a level that which would yield revenue equal to the prior year's revenue and is permitted subsequently to adjust millage rates up to the rates levied in the prior year. The Council resolution passed in August states the Council's desire to maintain the millage rates at the downward-adjusted level this year, wherever it is legally permissible to do so without impairing public health and safety and vital services of the city.

Budget Committee Chairman District "D" Councilmember Cynthia Hedge Morrell, led the council's budget process, saying the council has had to make some tough decisions, but has been clear from the beginning of this process that certain priorities would be funded to the best of the Council's ability.

"Since conclusion of the budget hearings, we have been working to attain a consensus that works for every citizen of New Orleans - ever mindful of continuing a deliberate course of recovery. We have funded public safety, transparency in government and important recovery and infrastructure items," said Councilmember Hedge-Morrell.

According to President and Councilmember-at-Large Arnie Fielkow, "During this month-long process we intended to send a clear message through our budget priorities that New Orleans supports all our current, returning and new residents and businesses. To that end, we are emphasizing full funding for public safety, the office of the Inspector General, both short-term and long-term economic development, and improving the City's accountability to our citizens through better customer service practices."

Councilmember Fielkow continued, "Our budget priorities are proof that this City Council is committed to having the community and government working together to foster an equitable and progressive environment necessary for a full recovery, growing economy and dynamic community."

Councilmember-at-Large Jackie Clarkson, joining the budget process this week immediately after being sworn-in, emphasized her council colleagues commitment to open and transparent government.

Councilmember Clarkson said, "I am in favor of full funding of the Inspector General's Office and the Ethics Review Board. I support removing future budget bureaucracy hurdles for the Office of the Inspector General and reinforcing our commitment to transparency in government."

According to District "A" Councilmember Shelley Midura, the budget philosophy that was put forth was to prioritize items and programs that have high returns on investment, whether that return is in the form of revenue, social benefit, or cleaner, more efficient, well-managed government.

"Our goal is a lean budget and bang for the buck. Funds for the office of the Inspector General, criminal justice reform implementation, and code enforcement are a must and they should all reap dividends beyond the dollar figures we allocate to them," said Councilmember Midura

District "B" Councilmember Stacy Head, discussed the resolve of the council through the budget process, to ensure that recovery and rebuilding stays on track and that the administration is fully accountable to the recovery plan it has laid out.

Councilmember Head said, "The budget that will be adopted is fiscally responsible and focused on assuring the achievable goals are reached. It will contain fund reserves to assure that the administration meets set goals. We intend to be a partner with the administration, but along the way we will hold complete and thorough budget reviews and performance standard checks."

District "C" Councilmember James Carter, Chairman of the Criminal Justice Committee, reiterated his intent to support appropriate funding for all components of the criminal justice system, along with funding for the implementation of best practices that will bring about reform and increased accountability from all departments.

"This Council is committed to making our criminal justice system fairer and our communities safer. We will continue to work systematically to implement innovative best practices and improve public safety, and I am looking forward to working closely with the Inspector General to create a just and equitable criminal justice

system. We also recognize the importance of addressing quality of life issues - blight, streets, drainage, overgrown lots, lighting - through this budgetary process. Public safety and quality of life issues will ultimately determine whether the citizens of New Orleans choose to remain in our great city," said Councilmember Carter.

During the budget process, District "E" Councilmember Cynthia Willard-Lewis, along with her council colleagues, continued recognition of the reality of post-Katrina life in New Orleans.

"During the budget review process, as a united City Council, we continued to root the recovery of this great city in its neighborhoods. It is time for us to start implementing the plans that were created by the citizens. It was imperative that we put our resources where they are needed most. I think we accomplished that. I continue to support a fair and equitable distribution of resources to all parts of the city and strengthening those departments that provide essential city services, recovery assistance, and crime prevention. We still have many challenges ahead and we must confront them head on," Councilmember Willard-Lewis said.

Budget presentation and comprehensive testimony was offered to the City Council by the heads of city departments and other municipal agencies throughout the month of November. The council is fully supportive of a quicker recovery pace but during the budget process has moved with careful review, management and oversight of the proposed 2008 City Budget, with the goal of staying a deliberate course of recovery and rebuilding for New Orleans.

New Orleans City Council

The New Orleans City Council is the legislative branch of New Orleans City government. The Council considers and enacts all local laws that govern the City of New Orleans. The Council also approves the operating and capital budgets for the City, as recommended by the mayor, and continually monitors revenues and expenditures for local government operations. The City Council is also the regulatory body for public utilities. It also reviews and has final say on many land use and zoning matters, as well as considers major economic development projects for the City. As a Board of Review for Orleans Parish, the Council examines appeals of property tax assessments for real estate taxes, and certifies tax rolls to the Louisiana Tax Commission. Other responsibilities of the Council include overseeing the operation of the public access television in Orleans Parish.

The City Council is comprised of five districts and two councilmembers-at-large. Council President and Councilmember-at-Large Arnie Fielkow; Council Vice-President and Councilmember-at-Large Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson; Council District "A" Shelley Midura; Council District "B" Stacy S. Head; Council District "C" James Carter; Council District "D" Cynthia Hedge-Morrell; and Council District "E" Cynthia Willard-Lewis.