

Unedited Notes from 02-16-10 Budget Presentation - Torah Day School

CEO Ellis commenced by recognizing elected officials: Comm. Connie Stokes and Comm. Jeff Rader. The CEO also recognized public safety officials. The CEO thanked Torah Day School for use of the facility and thanked the public for their participation in the decision-making process. Commissioner Stokes thanked the community for attending and stating the importance of their input. Comm. Rader thanked the community for their involvement, stating that this was one of the biggest turnouts of all budget meetings. He stated how they would need the direction of the public because it is going to be a difficult year.

CEO: Slide presentation of Dekalb County 2010 Budget

Questions/Comments:

Questioner # 1 James (employee of the Public Defender's Office)

James said he has been a DeKalb County homeowner for over 15 years, and public defender employee since 1991. Current cuts at the Public Defender's Office as scheduled are: thirteen positions will be lost and they will be left to handle twice the number of cases handled now. The cost of these cuts will exceed the money saved. He urged the CEO to reconsider budget cuts. He supported the 1.8 millage increase and stated that as a homeowner, a tax increase is necessary. However because of the budget cuts, he understands that he may go to the local library and find the doors locked.

James asked the CEO to reconsider cuts to the Public Defender's Office. James stated he supported the millage increase.

Response from the CEO: The County is taking a second look at some areas to address whether they may have been cut too sharply.

Questioner # 2 Judge Gordon (State Court Judge)

State Court cuts are absolutely untenable. The court system is not going to be able to have quality civil and criminal. Also, the current programs will have to be stopped and there will be an increase in crime. Public Safety is a continuum, and the State Court activities are a part of that continuum. Big problems with domestic violence in DeKalb

Judge Gordon stated "we need staff to run programs." "It doesn't make sense to add police officers and cut court programs." Judge Gordon supports a millage increase.

The State Court has created programs that don't cost the county a penny.

Question to the CEO: Can you consider having some of the positions unfunded for a few years versus completely eliminating the positions?

Response from the CEO: He is considering all options and does not want to cut so deeply that it cuts to the bone.

Questioner # 3 – Jim Smith

Jim Smith supports the millage increase. He would support it more readily if he could be assured that the county government was being run as efficiently as possible.

Jim Smith stated that pension contributions should be cut because 10% is much higher than average contribution in the private sector.

Jim Smith stated that he would like to see some of the county employees take on the burden.

Jim Smith said that by forcing people to retire, a younger person will take on the positions. A person with less experience will be able to save costs, but quality of service will be lost due to lack of experience.

Response from the CEO: Efficiency takes time. They are currently implementing procedures to cut costs, such as turning lights off when buildings are evacuated. They are considering different recommendations. The County has a defined benefits plan that works on a formula. The Pension Board watches the market. Contributions from the employee and contributions from the employer usually rise at the same time. This year, the employer's contributions will not rise as much. They are also having Human Resources look at a twice a month pay period rather than a bi-weekly pay period. They are looking into other institutional changes. Sooner or later we will have to pay for infrastructure and we will have to start making adjustments in order to find the correct balance of cuts and expenditures to keep things right.

Questioner # 4 - Lynn Colin

Lynn Colin said that her first reaction was that this budget is on the back of the poor – more fees on citizens - and things will get much worse.

Ms. Colin sees the county trying to juggle problems, instead of doing anything creative out of their imaginations. "The county should be doing something good."

Ms. Colin stated that there will be a press conference for 100 million gardens across the US.

Ms. Colin suggested that Dekalb County could use people in jail and let them work on gardens and plant trees and do something exciting for the community.

Ms. Colin suggested that Dekalb County could get in touch with Georgia Tech to install solar panels on county buildings.

Response from the CEO: The County has very innovative programs, such as the NACO award winning methane gas program at the landfill. We are the first County to have an Officer Next Door Program, in which we will provide financial assistance to officers in order to help stabilize community values. We are looking at different areas of the budget we can cut. The county must focus on the essential functions of governments: jails, courts, public safety.

Questioner # 5 – Mr. Tom Keating

Mr. Keating wants the county to consider a resumption of the program he used to have funded through the Local Law Enforcement Block Grant program that paid a small amount for people to clean school bathrooms. He claims to have empirical information that shows that clean school bathrooms lead to a reduction in vandalism by young people 11-18. There are 80,000 11-18 year olds in DeKalb County.

Response from the CEO: CEO Ellis thanked Tom and said they are collecting specific ideas to address vandalism and other issues.

Questioner # 6 – John Hawkins

Mr. Hawkins said a bond for the library system was passed several years ago. Mr. Hawkins said the library book collection is outdated and that collections are being replaced very slowly.

Mr. Hawkins stated that libraries are the face of the county and the heart of the community.

Mr. Hawkins stated that in the current economy, many more people use the computers to conduct a job search and they need help with technology, therefore the staff is very valuable to community

Mr. Hawkins asked that special consideration be given to the libraries as the budget cuts are considered.

Response from the CEO: Said that it is important that supporters of the library make their concerns known to all.

Questioner # 7 – Mr. Dean (?)

Mr. Dean said that libraries are an excellent way for DeKalb County to represent itself.

Mr. Dean asked the CEO if it were possible to postpone some of the bond initiatives so that existing libraries could be supported.

Response from the CEO: The CEO directed CFO Dr. Michael Bell to respond and Dr. Bell indicated that there is some flexibility for libraries.

Questioner # 8 - Frances Morrison (DeKalb County employee and DeKalb County resident)

Francis Morrison has been working for Dekalb County for 19 years.

Ms. Morrison read a statement in which she suggested that County Commissioners think of alternatives to raising the millage and other than cutting salaries and benefits to employees

Ms. Morrison suggested that if employees' salaries are cut, they will be forced into foreclosure and the community will lose even more value to the tax digest, because most employees are Dekalb County residents.

Ms. Morrison suggested that cutting salaries will impact service and increase public health care spending because many employees will be not able to afford health insurance and then they will seek medical care in the emergency room.

Ms. Morrison suggested that the proposed cuts to employees pay and benefits will impact service delivery, will lead to a breakdown in community services and will ripple into the community in immeasurable ways.

Response from the CEO: CEO Ellis thanked Ms. Morrison for her comments, asked her and received a copy of her statement.

Questioner # 9 – Mr. Mike Kaplan (Attorney)

Mr. Kaplan asked that the current budget for the court system be maintained and that the prospect of cutting the court's budget by 17% could end up costing the county more in the long run because of later litigation, such as the county being held liable for causing constitutional violations. Example, persons might not have access to a speedy trial.

Mr. Kaplan suggested that a 17% cut would mean that the court system won't be able to perform its basic function.

Mr. Kaplan suggested that DeKalb County needs a strong public defenders system or convictions can be overturned.

Mr. Kaplan's question to the CEO: Is the 17% cut still an option and can you commit to not letting that happen?

Response from the CEO: CEO said he was an attorney in private practice for many years and understands the role and responsibilities of the Court system. It is not his objective to cut the court system's budget. The BOC has the authority and he makes the recommendations. He is confident that everyone will do the right thing and make a final decision based on a built consensus. End result may not be everything that any particular person votes to support. "We're trying to do the right thing."

Questioner # 10 – Bill Klein

Mr. Klein said he is now unemployed and his family's income is down 60%, much more than the 4% decline in county revenues.

Mr. Klein wanted to know if all areas that could be cut from the county budget had been explored.

Mr. Klein questioned the need for 4 sanitation pickups each week.

Mr. Klein asked: "Why can't the county figure out how to cut its own expenses instead of raising taxes?"

Response from the CEO: CEO stated that he is sorry to hear about Mr. Klein's unfortunate circumstances. The decisions about the budget and raising the millage are very difficult to make and they will impact citizens.

CEO stated that the county government is trying to be responsible and follow the principle that government should be doing everything it can do before imposing more on its customers. It's a balance. When you elect the CEO and BOC, you elect people to be good stewards, organize the best government possible, and exercise good judgment, and do things for the right reasons. We will do the best we can. He is always asked if he cares about the citizens whether he cuts or increases. We won't be able to please everybody, and we all will have to make a sacrifice.

Questioner # 11 – Ms. Abby Resnick (DeKalb County School Librarian)

Ms. Resnick stated that early retirement to address the budget shortfall is not the best answer and that the county just should not raise taxes.

Ms. Resnick stated that the county is a business and should cut expenses before raising "prices."

Ms. Resnick stated that this is a great county that has great services.

Ms. Resnick's question to the CEO: "Will our assessments be going down?"

Response from the CEO: CEO stated that the county government is working with independent Board of Tax Assessors. None of the elected officials want to raise taxes because "we know what the reaction will be." The natural tendency of elected officials is not to raise taxes. However, there will be an impact either way, spend or cut. This is not an either/or strategy, some of both spending and cutting will result in the best outcome.

Questioner # 12 – Ms. Mary Pat Crouch (member of the DeKalb County Library Board)

Ms. Crouch stated that 2 years ago the Libraries budget for acquisitions was \$2 million. That has now been cut to \$100,000. She worries that we are cutting “bone” in the Library system. There are over 3.2 million visits to library every year. One hundred thousand dollars can’t even pay for the subscription budget, much less the budget for new books. She would like to see the tax level stay the same but would support a tax increase as a last resort.

Response from the CEO: Library employees, courts, and public defenders want the budget to stay the same, but in order to do so, we would have to increase the our taxes.

Questioner # 13 – Mr. Peter Jenkins

Mr. Jenkins had a question about the Inspector General position. He wanted to know the cost of the position, who would fill the position and to whom the Inspector General would report?

Response from the CEO: The Inspector General Position was proposed by citizens as a best-practices response to allegations of waste, fraud, and abuse and would save taxpayer dollars and ensure integrity. The Inspector General position would be an independent person who reports to a board; similar in reporting structure to the Chief Appraiser or an independent tax appraiser. The Inspector General position would have no affiliation with the CEO or BOC.