

To the District Councils and others: Each summer, based on input from the district councils, the City Neighborhood Council sends to the Mayor and City Council a letter with budget recommendations. The following draft is submitted by CNC's Budget Committee for consideration by the District Councils and CNC. Revision suggestions and comments are welcome, to CNC chair Phil Shack, philip.shack@gmail.com; and to CNC budget committee co-chairs Bill Bradburd bill@grandscheme.com, (206) 393-7564 and Chris Leman, cleman@oo.net (206) 322-5463. (District Councils are also urged to send their own budget letters to the City Council, especially on district-specific recommendations that cannot be included in the citywide CNC letter.)

CITY NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL [review draft]

June xx, 2013

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 2014 BUDGET

Dear Mayor McGinn and members of the City Council:

Continuing in the budget advisory role assigned by City legislation to the City Neighborhood Council and the thirteen District Councils, and based on consultation with and among the district councils, CNC offers its suggestions for the 2013 budget. Eight key themes and priorities are in the bulleted first section, and budget recommendations are in the twelve numbered items that follow.

THEMES AND PRIORITIES

- Keeping communities safe and vital is never more important than when budgets are tight.
- Stewardship of City facilities and properties (especially maintenance) is essential even in the toughest budget times.
- Civic engagement must be a high priority.
- With revenue in short supply, tax expenditures (revenues foregone through deductions and exemptions) should be sunsetted or substantially reduced.
- Consolidations and efficiencies are strongly preferable to cuts, especially cuts causing greater future costs.
- Involve the public early, broadly, and often in assessing public-private partnerships, in taxing and spending decisions, and in decisions on which bond and levy measures should go to the ballot.
- Even in the toughest times, small but worthy initiatives can and must be afforded.

BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Neighborhood Service Centers and Neighborhood District Coordinators. CNC is not reconciled to recent years' cutbacks. The service centers are the City's outposts in the community and are particularly needed for seniors, youth, the disabled, and those on low incomes or for whom English is not their first language. Neighborhood District Coordinators involve residents and businesses and bring grassroots ideas into government. Please restore past cuts in these inexpensive services with their multiplier effect in civic engagement, community self-help and stewardship.
2. Neighborhood Matching Fund. Not fully recovered from past cuts, NMF involves citizens at a fundamental level in their government and in building community. When direct City programs are being cut, NMF is more needed to leverage private dollars and volunteer hours that help make up for what the City can no longer afford to do.

3. Civic engagement fairs. Existing funds in the departments and in the office of the Mayor should enable each year in different parts of Seattle six or more civic engagement fairs. Significant resources are currently going into the Mayor's Town Meetings. We suggest that civic engagement fairs with agency tables be co-sponsored jointly (if they wish) by one or more district councils and that these civic engagement fairs tap some agency resources already going into the Mayor's Town Meetings, so that no new funds would be needed.

4. Webcast of board and commission meetings. A low-cost initiative that the City should undertake even in a tight budget is the webcast of meetings of its boards and commissions, only a few of which are now recorded for the City web site or Seattle Channel. This inexpensive technology can be managed by board members themselves or by City staff already in attendance.

5. Public safety. A precondition for community is to protect residents and businesses from crime, fire, and disasters. As the largest single expense from the General Subfund, uniformed police and fire services should be delivered in the most cost-effective way to achieve mission objectives. Uniformed services go furthest when civilian staff assist block watch and emergency preparedness volunteers. Vigorous resident and business efforts at the block level to prevent crime and "broken windows" have confined the spread of crime "hot spots," which will proliferate as block watch efforts decline. Past cuts in the Police Department's crime prevention coordinators should be restored, and their efforts should be better integrated with its Office of Emergency Management. CNC also requests that SPD make more information available on its web site about its precinct advisory councils--how they are appointed, their procedures, when they meet, etc.

6. Health, human services, housing, libraries, and community centers. Helping the most vulnerable is the right thing to do, and reduces government costs in the long run. Homelessness is a regional problem and its solution must involve other cities, King and other counties, and state government. Keeping libraries open throughout the week and year is among the City's core public services, especially for those without access to a computer and the internet in this difficult economy. Community centers are a vital component of community-building and public health. Late night hours and teen programs should be expanded for youth development and safety.

7. Parks and Seattle Center. Just as private owners protect their investment, the City must fully maintain its park and Seattle Center structures, roads, paths, gardens, and ecosystems. Recent years' cuts should be restored to painting, carpentry, metal work, plumbing, electrical repair, weeding, pruning, watering, cleaning and trash pickup place this legacy in jeopardy. Unchecked invasive weeds in parks endanger desired vegetation and spread outside the parks to natural areas as well as to private gardens. With vegetation and physical structures alike, deferred maintenance imposes future costs that rise exponentially and unsustainably.

8. Bridges, roads, walkways, and bikeways, greenways, and green streets. Public health and safety require continued efforts to fund walkways, bikeways, and safe crossings of roads. Maintenance is also lagging, especially for the non-arterials (most neighborhood, business, and industrial streets) which are 60 percent of Seattle's lane mileage and at least 40 percent of the maintenance backlog cost. Neglect today allows deterioration that becomes more costly to repair with each passing year. Avoidable damage should especially be reduced, such as from vehicles that exceed weight limits either illegally or (e.g. with buses and solid waste pickup vehicles) because laws exempt them from these limits. Damage is so expensive to repair; please be proactive in preventing it.

9. Trees. SDOT's urban forestry program should be restored from previous years' cuts. Also, we urge that SPU lengthen and promote the annual fall free pickup period for garden waste, and limit charges for the dumping of leaves at transfer stations. Owners are removing mature trees because of the cost of disposing of leaves, thereby undermining the City's tree coverage goals.

10. Contracting of outreach and involvement. We are concerned that departments like City Light, SPU, and SDOT are making too little use of Department of Neighborhoods staff, who have unique outreach and involvement skills. We suggest closer oversight of outreach and involvement to

ensure that contracting out is not overused and that these departments are encouraged to spend some outreach and involvement dollars by reimbursing DON staff.

11. Public-Private Partnerships. Recent controversies over private uses on City property have not been well served by a piecemeal approach and a lack of sustained oversight. Elected officials and the public must receive earlier and more complete information about proposed new partnerships, including independent expert review to ensure consistency with the public interest. A Public-Private Partnership Panel oversaw such projects in the 1990s; something like it is urgently needed today.

12. Tax Expenditures. Just as at the federal and state levels, taxpayers pay more as Seattle foregoes millions in potential revenue by waiving or reducing taxes for favored businesses, as with the Multifamily Tax Exemption that a recent Auditor report found wanting. CNC suggests that all tax expenditures be reviewed annually, and if the public interest is not well-served, be repealed or reduced.

13. Strategic bond and levy agenda. CNC urges that, before decisions are made on whether to issue non-voter approved bonds and whether to put particular bond and levy measures before the voters, the Mayor and City Council jointly adopt, with public involvement, a strategic bond and levy agenda setting firm priorities and committing to a public process for the final decisions each year.

13. Video Voters Guide. Seattle Channel and the Ethics and Elections Commission are producing this guide only in odd numbered years. As local ballot measures are increasingly common in even numbered years, the Video Voters Guide should be produced every year, at least for local ballot measures.

14. On-line availability of City documents. Most ordinances and resolutions adopted prior to the mid-1990s remain inaccessible electronically. Funding should be provided to the City Clerk to digitize these documents and place them on the web site in a searchable form. And unlike the Office of the Hearing Examiner, the Ethics and Elections Commission has not yet placed on-line most of its opinions; it should be provided funds for this purpose.

15. Retention of public records. With technology improvements dramatically reducing the cost of data storage, the City can afford to retain all public records for several years (Pierce County retains all documents for six years, the statute of limitations for felonies). Seattle's current deletion of many e-mails and other documents within weeks of when they are created or received is not consistent with open and accountable government.

16. Prompt publication of final budget. Agencies and the public cannot effectively track spending when the final budget as approved by the City Council in November is not posted on the City web site until February of the fiscal year, more than two months later. Additional funds for earlier posting should be provided to the City Budget Office, which does remarkable work with little staff.

Conclusion. Past cuts in maintenance of the City's structures, parks, and roads are not sustainable and should be reversed, as should past cuts in programs that empower residents and businesses. Grasp opportunities to make government more open and to target existing spending more effectively on mission objectives. Achieve savings by reducing contracting and by reducing or eliminating tax expenditures that favor some businesses over others and over individual taxpayers.

Thanks for your consideration of the above recommendations. A draft of this letter was distributed for comment and revision to the District Councils, was discussed at the May 20 CNC meeting, and was revised, and authorized at the June 24 CNC meeting.

Sincerely,