

NT: Virtual budget hearing gets 'Zoom bombed'

Residents unhappy with proposed tax increases

NT Council to discuss budget further on Nov. 12

BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO

A virtual public hearing on the City of North Tonawanda's 2021 budget did not go as planned on Monday. Just moments after the hearing went live on Zoom, the stream was hijacked, or "Zoom bombed" by internet trolls. As City Accountant Jeffrey Zellner began his budget presentation, trolls began screaming profanities and racial slurs while others posted pornographic images. Unable to regain control of the live stream, city officials finally shut the Zoom call down and urged attendees to view its regular live stream via the city clerk/treasurer Facebook page and call-in via telephone.

Even before the Zoom bombing began, the stream was riddled with technical difficulties. Attendees were unable to hear Mayor Arthur Pappas' re-read his 2021 budget message to the council. Zellner commented on some of the early issues, noting that the computer hosting the stream was older, running on Windows Vista. He also said the city had conducted three test runs leading up to public hearing.

As the stream shifted platforms, things didn't get much better for city officials. Many callers and commenters were outraged that the hearing was held virtually rather than in-person, noting that it greatly limits those without internet connections and those who are technologically illiterate. Pappas said he was deferring to Niagara County for guidance on when City Hall could reopen.

However, most commenters simply expressed dissatisfaction over the mayor's proposed budget which features a 6.52% property tax increase. Additionally, "Water and sewer base rates will increase from \$12 to \$15," and, "Sewer rates will rise from \$4.50 to \$5 per thousand gallons." Pappas' message said that the increases were necessary largely to offset the lack of incoming state funding, where many municipalities are currently seeing a roughly 20% decrease. He also said the move was recommended by the New York state comptroller's office during its audit earlier this year. The audit notes the city had been slow to raise taxes over the last decade even though expenditures had been steadily increasing.

Many callers said they did not want to see a tax increase happen amid the ongoing pandemic.

"Cutting things like support for volunteer fire companies or closing Memorial Pool might save a few dollars, but these are important services to our community, and the savings did not come close to closing our gap. North Tonawanda city government itself has been doing more with less for years."

Mayor Arthur Pappas

Zadzilka's attempt to downplay the proposed increases did not go over well either. In response to one caller, he said, "(The increase) equates to \$90 more you'll have to pay this year, per \$100,000. That's a big tax increase? \$90?"

The comment was criticized widely on Facebook. Many argued that, beyond just the ongoing financial impacts many ordinary citizens face because of the pandemic, the proposed increases would be particularly hardest on retirees and others on a fixed income.

With money needing to come from somewhere, many commenters recommended the city make more cuts. Some pointed to cutting personnel costs including pension funding and health care costs for workers. Zellner noted that personnel (along with benefits and compensation costs) usually accounts for roughly 75% of the city's budget. He went on to say that while the city is looking to make (and has already in some cases) made those kinds of cuts, many of those expenses were contractual and would require further negotiations. The hope is that in the future, workers will pay into it more themselves.

However, as indicated in the mayor's budget message, further cuts would begin to have drastic impacts on services.

"Cutting things like support for volunteer fire companies or closing Memorial Pool might save a few dollars, but these are important services to our community, and the savings did not come close to closing our gap. North Tonawanda city government itself has been doing more with less for years. Our departments are down to a bare minimum of workers since there have been many cuts over the

years. Department heads have been asked to reevaluate their budgets more than once this year to further reduce costs and look for efficiency. We implemented a hiring freeze and required any expenditure over \$1,500 be approved by the mayor. Yet, these and other steps were not nearly enough to stem the tide."

Elsewhere, Zadzilka also explained the city's reluctance to make additional cuts to essential services.

"Public safety is prime; that's our police that's our fire," Zadzilka said. He added the city has filled vacancies but has also tried to cut down on overtime costs.

"We're trying to give them who they need, especially still amid the COVID-19 crisis, so they can respond and have the proper personnel," he said.

Another concern that was settled early on was the fear that residents could lose a rebate check if the city goes over the state tax cap. However, Zellner explained that particular program expired in 2019 and residents would still receive rebates. He also indicated the city will be more aggressive going after delinquent tax payments in order to regain lost revenue.

Some city department heads were on hand to field questions and discuss some of the cuts that their divisions are facing. Public Works/Recycling Superintendent Mark Zellner said the department had cut \$45,000 out of the personal services/overtime expenses and \$30,000 out of the salt fund as there are left-over funds from previous years.

Some commenters took issue with the water/sewer increases (which are said to be going towards making much needed repairs and improvements to water and sewer lines throughout the city) claiming that NT has some of the highest rates in the area. Superintendent of Water/Wastewater Bill Davignon disputed the notion. Using the Town of Wheatfield's budget as an example, he said that 75% of their water costs are accounted for in property taxes. NT pays through the monthly water bill. He said Wheatfield residents would see lower payments per month but at the end of the year, the municipalities are fairly comparable.

"It's a falsehood that we pay more than everybody," Davignon said. "I've had people tell me I'm a liar and, after 33 years, I find it kind of amusing. But no, this is the truth. ... It's just the way we bill. So we do not pay the highest rates in Western New York or anything like that, it's just we really do pay the highest directly in the mailbox. ... When you actually pay the whole bill; what you're paying for property taxes and everything, we pay just slightly above average."

He went on to urged residents who would like more clarification and figures to email him at Billdavignon@northtonawanda.org

As talks of cuts continued, points were made how damaging they can ultimately be as many of the seemingly non-essential services have a drastic impact on many lives.

Some callers asked questions regarding the reopening of the youth and senior centers. One caller gave a particularly sad account of a senior family member that has seen negative impacts to her emotional and mental wellbeing as a result of the senior center remaining shuttered due to COVID-19.

"She's 80 years old and this is really the only outlet she has for socialization. ... Now, she's so depressed because she can hardly get out of the house and this place was really her only outlet for her. ... It's the only place she had," the caller said.

Department of Youth, Recreation & Parks Director Alex

Domaradzki explained the current closure was related to COVID-19 protocols and that it would be up to the city when it feels safe to reopen. However, he said he hoped that these types of programs would not find themselves on the wrong side of the city's looming cuts.

"As someone who has two kids; from someone who's been in that position before - the community needs these types of programs for both mental health and physical health, they're both youth and even seniors need that," Domaradzki said. "I don't know where we stand on cutting those for a significant amount of time. I hope the council would consider not doing that."

Common Council President Eric Zadzilka repeatedly assured residents that nothing was "set in stone" and that the budget and the proposed increases had not been voted on or approved. He said the council will take residents' concerns into consideration as it heads toward its work session on Tuesday Nov. 10 where the budget will be debated and prepared.

The budget will be made available on the city's website and then voted on Thursday, Nov. 12.

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