

# North Tonawanda to submit late budget; council members worry about transparency

**BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO**  
Interim Tribune Editor

In a letter from the mayor's office this week, the City of North Tonawanda announced this year's tentative budget will be submitted late.

The message reads: "As COVID-19 restrictions continue in NYS, budgetary practices are difficult to finalize. The process has been ongoing to develop a budget for 2021. Keeping this in mind, I want to inform residents that the date of Oct. 1, 2020 will require an extension. Citing various factors for the delay are as follows:

√ State aid was cut this year by 20%

√ The State has not given any projections for 2021 Revenue sharing

√ Funding is going down while personal services go up due to contracts NYS highway assistance funding is being delayed with no feedback on when it will be expected

√ Funding is being lost while expenses are contractual rising due to step increase and rates of 2% Minimum wage will increase for part time employees in 2021

√ There is no update on Chps funding money that will be received The Federal Government has not given assurance for stop-gap funding Departments are being instructed to reexamine their budget requests due to the negative impact of the coronavirus

"Residents need to understand the unusual circumstances for this year's budget. The budget and sales tax revenue by the county was on track to exceed projections

before COVID 19. Therefore, a budget for 2021 will be presented when we have specific knowledge as to what our funding will be for the future year."

At Tuesday's Common Council work session, some members expressed fear that a late budget would leave the council, as well as the public, little time to review the figures.

Alderman-at-Large Austin Tylec noted that between last year's budget being submitted late, and the results of a blistering audit by the NYS comptroller's office in August, the optics of the announcement could be perceived as a lack of transparency on the city's part.

Noting the uncertainty surrounding state funds, Tylec suggested the city compile two possible budgets: a "worst case scenario" which project 20% cuts across all city departments, and another without.

"It's good for all of us to see (what) those expenses and line items are that we know, and then we can sort of fill in the blanks with the funding piece (as we go), because it could be January before we get some answers on some of the funding," Tylec said. Elsewhere he added, "I want to see something, a draft. It's not the whole budget, we know that, but a draft would be nice to sort of filter through."

City Accountant Jeffrey Zellner expressed concern about Tylec's plan, noting that a draft would require numerous talks with union heads before accurate estimates could be made.

However, Tylec's point was

echoed by 2nd Ward Alderman Frank DiBernardo. After reviewing some of the figures with this week with Zellner, DiBernardo said he felt that the public should have some idea about the potential financial issues if the "worst case scenario" becomes reality.

"The swing was unreal. People have to understand, it's not \$100,000; it's a big number. It's to the point where you're cutting services and everything else because you just have nothing coming in. It's huge," DiBernardo said. Elsewhere he said, "It's the difference between not doing a sidewalk and cutting a whole department. It is a big number."

"So, I think we owe the people a baseline (of) where we stand ... So, what can we release to the public right now showing where we're at? ... I think the public should hear the best case scenario/worst case scenario and (that) we're working this out. We will get a balanced budget, there's going to be a lot of sleepless nights for people, and we're going to make some tough decisions if the worst case scenario comes through," DiBernardo said.

Tylec went on to add, "We need something to work with so we're not last minute. In years prior, we have been late on the budget, or we only gave 24 hours to make changes after public comment. And I just fear this pattern is going to happen again. We only have six weeks to pass something."

Mayor Arthur Pappas said he understood the concerns but listed reasons why he would rather wait. He noted that, during recent

discussions, department heads have been asked to go back and make additional budget cuts and he is still awaiting the updated estimates. The city had previously asked departments to budget only for around 15% in losses from the state.

He also expressed worry that having multiple figures and scenarios out in the public could lead to more confusion.

"We want to do it right. If we're a little slower than some, so be it," Pappas said. "I want it done right and I want what's fair to the taxpayers. And when we come back with a budget, I want to be able to say it's been deliberated on, our department heads know where they stand, the council knows where they stand, and the residents know what's coming. So I think all these suggestions are good ones, but I'm not just going to suddenly flip a coin and say 'Okay, tomorrow we're going to present a budget. We're not going to do that because it would be dishonest ... there's still a lot of unanswered questions (from the state).'" He also added that council members would receive information related to those talks but warned that the city accountant would not be filing a "dissertation" after every meeting.

Council President Eric Zadzilka said that the tentative budget is ultimately up to the mayor to approve and it should be his decision when to release it.

"I've said before, this is, right now, the mayor's budget. The council gets the budget after the mayor, but (Pappas) has been very

generous over the last few years to allow the council to weigh-in. ... But the mayor wants to do exactly what he's saying: a responsible budget," Zadzilka said.

Elsewhere during the meeting, discussions turned to the possibility of raising the city's tax levy limit. A public hearing on the matter was originally slated to occur this week but there wasn't enough time between the posted legal notice and the meeting date.

The public hearing will now take place 6 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 13, in the Common Council chambers.

Zadzilka noted the law does not mean that a tax increase will occur, rather it will legally allow for the increase should it be deemed necessary. He said the council would be doing whatever possible to avoid raising taxes and pushed back on comments from the public that assumed large tax increases were certain.

"We would not like to have this put on the back of the taxpayers. Some people (have said) 'Oh, they're going to do a double-digit tax increase.' Well, I've been on this council for 10 years and we've never had a double-digit tax increase. But there's also never been (COVID-19). There are other municipalities laying off, there are other municipalities doing double digit tax increases. ... We're going to make this work and deal with this. This is what we're responsible for," Zadzilka said.

The next council meeting will be at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 6.

## Niagara County DMV to host 2nd Saturday event for driver's license renewals

Niagara County Clerk Joseph A. Jastrzemski announced the Niagara County Department of Motor Vehicles will hold its second Saturday event for those who need to renew their driver's licenses. No appointment is necessary.

"Our last event was a huge success as we processed several hundred driver's license renewals for Niagara County residents, but we also know there are thousands of people who still need to renew," said Jastrzemski, who again stressed that, under Gov. Andrew Cuomo's executive order, all driver's licenses that expired after March 1 are still valid until further notice from New York. "We were able to keep social distancing, people were very respectful with wearing masks and everything ran smoothly, which is why we are doing this again."

Jastrzemski said the events will be held from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Oct. 3 at the Lockport DMV, 111 Main St., and the North Tonawanda DMV, 500 Wheatfield St. One must be in line no later than 12:30 p.m. More than a dozen DMV staffers will be on hand to process the paperwork.

Jastrzemski reiterated this is for license transactions only - such as renewals, switching to an enhanced license or Real ID, upgrading to commercial driver's licenses and so on. Residents must bring original documentation - not copies - and are strongly encouraged to visit <https://dmv.ny.gov/>

driver-license for a complete list of acceptable forms of Identification. Residents should also bring their own pen.

Jastrzemski said he has heard from many residents who have expressed frustration the DMV is not back to its full operations and is still requiring appointments during normal business hours.

"I understand the frustration I have heard from some residents and I share many of those feelings," he said. "My staff and I are regularly trying to find creative ways to provide the services the public needs, like the recently

installed drop boxes or these Saturday events, but the fact is New York state's pandemic rules will

continue to restrict how we conduct DMV business for the foreseeable future."

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