

VOICE OF THE CITIZEN 2013-14 BUDGET PLANNING PROCESS

City of Rochester



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the planning process for the City of Rochester's fiscal year 2013-14 budget, Mayor Thomas S. Richards invited the public to participate in public sessions to gather their input and provide them with information about the City's budget. Attendance this year was lower than in past years, with about 100 individuals attending four sessions. However, those who did participate shared great ideas and provided the Mayor and his leadership team with a strong sense of their priorities.

Eight primary topic areas were discussed. They are listed below followed by a brief summary of findings. The body of the report contains more detailed data collected on each topic.

- 1. Taxes, Fees, and New Revenues** – Half the online survey takers approved of increasing the property tax levy by 2% (53%) but forum participants offered other ideas for generating more revenue through existing fees and fines.
- 2. Police Services** – Participants in all four quadrants approved cuts to Mounted Patrol, though some thought the City should explore merging this function with the County or reallocating the funding to police patrol functions. Other suggestions included shifting police resources towards more preventive programs and limiting or cutting administrative costs.
- 3. Fire Services** – The consistent feedback on this topic was to avoid any cuts to Firefighters or Fire Companies, but instead to reduce overtime and administrative positions.
- 4. Pensions: Response to Increasing Expense** – Participants were not as engaged on this topic as others; however it appears general support exists for smoothing the cost of pensions under one of the options offered by N.Y. State for 2013-14.
- 5. Infrastructure, Public Facilities, Neighborhood Real Estate** – Online participants agreed that the City should defer cash capital for public art (63%) and for Lake Avenue construction (50%). Participants in all quadrants saw the value of deferring some capital projects, although the selection of which projects to defer or eliminate varied. Some felt capital dollars should be more focused on housing or youth needs.
- 6. Youth and Library Neighborhood Services** – As in prior years, participants strongly agree that Recreation Centers and Libraries should not be closed. While some online survey participants thought we could merge the functions with the school district or reduce the number of facilities, all of those who attended in person were in favor of

maintaining or even increasing these city resources. Durand Beach saw less support, with most participants agreeing it should be closed.

7. **Federal Funding Reductions & Sequestration** – Some felt these federal funds should be used more efficiently or more flexibly, but comments did not center on any strong themes.
8. **Organizational Efficiencies** – Since the reductions proposed in this section do not affect services, citizens generally agree that the reductions should be made. A number of additional suggestions were made to evaluate various staffing configurations from reducing the size of City Council to engaging more volunteers at Recreation Centers and Libraries to requiring one week of furlough for employees. Other participants suggested the City look at merging or outsourcing selected services, and look to technology to find more efficiencies.

The open space conferencing process used by the City for the past several years generated enthusiasm, extensive conversation and discussion around the topics, and yielded numerous excellent suggestions as well as conflicting opinions on some of the proposed cuts or service changes.

BACKGROUND

Voice of the Citizen

The City of Rochester has used a Voice of the Citizen (VOC) (previously Voice of the Customer) approach for the last five years to provide citizens with an open forum in which to discuss their budgetary priorities, needs and concerns. The Mayor values the opportunity to inform citizens about the state of the City's finances, as well as to obtain feedback on citizen priorities. This report and the presentation of data provide a snapshot of citizen perceptions and opinions on the subjects discussed at four public forums.

The City of Rochester is planning now for the fiscal year that begins July 1, 2013 and ends June 30, 2014, or fiscal year 2013-14. The Office of Management and Budget estimates a budget gap of \$28 million due to flat revenues such as state aid and sales tax, and increasing expenses such as health care and pension costs.

Senior managers, department heads and the Mayor have identified a number of ideas for increasing revenues and decreasing expenses in the upcoming year to close this estimated gap. Many of those ideas, as well as some ideas from previous years, were put on the table for discussion by VOC attendees.

Process

Mayor Richards provided a welcome and Christopher Wagner, Budget Director delivered a presentation on the current state of the budget. Deputy Mayor Leonard Redon outlined the open space process to be used and invited participants to join breakout groups to further discuss the eight topics outlined or any other topic of their choosing.

Forty-five minutes were allocated for discussion on the eight topics:

1. Taxes, Fees and New Revenues
2. Police Services
3. Fire Services
4. Pensions: Response to Increasing Expense
5. Youth and Library Neighborhood Services
6. Infrastructure, Public Facilities, Neighborhood Real Estate
7. Federal Funding Reductions & Sequestration
8. Organizational Efficiencies

At the conclusion of the open space conferencing, the group came back together to report out on their main themes. In addition to verbal and written comments provided at the public forums, individuals who couldn't make one of these sessions could go on the city website to submit a comment via an online survey. An additional 32 responses were received online.

Schedule

The public was invited by the Mayor to participate in one or more public sessions. Four meetings were held, one in each quadrant of the city:

Quadrant	Date	Location	Attendance
Northeast	March 21, 2013	Freddie Thomas Campus, 625 Scio St.	26
Southeast	March 27, 2013	School #1, 85 Hillside Ave	24
Northwest	April 1, 2013	Edgerton Community Center, 41 Backus St.	27
Southwest	April 3, 2013	Adams St. Community Center, 85 Adams St.	26

The City's website prominently highlighted the dates and locations of the VOC sessions, and social media provided additional promotion through the City Twitter and Facebook accounts. Flyers announcing the dates and locations were sent to neighborhood and community groups. Paid advertising was placed in City Newspaper, WHAM 1180 and on WDKX. Television and newspaper media attended several sessions.

FINDINGS

In this section, we identify themes heard from forum participants and online survey submissions for each of the eight major topics. Each theme includes sample comments and the source of the individual comment (either a quadrant public forum or an online submission). Themes are followed by a summary of the votes provided in the online survey by 32 individuals. Participants could select multiple items, so the items may add to more than 100%. The survey results are not statistically significant and represent only those individuals who chose to visit the City's website and take the VOC survey.

Table Topic 1: Taxes, Fees, and new Revenues

Half the online survey takers (53%) approved of increasing the property tax levy by 2% but forum participants offered other ideas for generating more revenue through existing fees and fines.

Themes from Forum Participants

1. Generate more revenue through enforcement of existing laws and policies

- "Issue more parking tickets to violators." (NE)
- "Need more enforcement on loitering, noise, zoning violations, absent landlords." (NE)
- "Levy extra fee on entertainment." (SE)

- “Remove restrictions on small businesses (hours, items to sell) to generate more sales tax revenue.” (SW)
- “Increase downtown parking garage rates, add parking meters in busy areas.” (online)

2. Increase taxes/fees

- “Benchmark water rates and embellishments with other cities; is the City charging enough?” (NW)
- “Increase water consumption rates.” (SW)
- “Tax increase could save Fire Company and cops; increase refuse and water rates to reflect actual costs.” (online)
- “If people really want to be buried in a City cemetery they’ll pay a few dollars more.” (online)
- “Charge a fee for bulk refuse pick up.” (online)

3. Establish fair assessment and standard property tax table for all properties

- “Take some burden off the resident taxpayer and have landlords and businesses pay their fair share.” (NE)
- “Return tax-abated properties to full assessed value.” (SE)
- “Small local stores claim to pay more in property tax than national chains.” (SW)

4. Address vacant properties more quickly

- “Improve the tax base by aggressively dealing with vacant lots and buildings.” (SE)
- “Sell and deal with vacant properties sooner.” (NW)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

Taxes, Fees and New Revenues (n=32)	Votes	% of respondents selecting this proposal
Increase Property Tax Levy by 2% (typical increase=\$27/year) (raise \$3,200,000)	17	53%
Increase Refuse Rate by 1% (typical increase=\$3.59/year) (raise \$206,200)	14	44%
Increase Water Rate by 1% (typical increase=\$3.20/year) (raise \$355,090)	12	38%
Increase cemetery sales of internment inventory, burials, cremations (raise \$150,000)	11	34%
<i>Note: Online survey participants could select multiple items, so items add to more than 100%.</i>		

Table Topic 2: Police Services

Participants in all four quadrants approved cuts to Mounted Patrol, though some thought the City should explore merging this function with Monroe County or reallocating the funding to police patrol functions. A number of suggestions were made to shift police resources towards more preventive programs and to limit administrative costs.

Themes from Forum Participants

1. Cut, reduce, or merge the Mounted Patrol

- “Eliminate Mounted Patrol—what value do they provide?” (NE)
- “Cut or reduce Mounted Patrol.” (SE)
- “Eliminate Mounted Patrol or reallocate those resources to patrol positions.” (NW)
- “Businesses should pay the cost of Mounted Patrol if used as special events.” (SW)
- “Is it possible to share services with the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office? They have Mounted Patrol, K-9, SCUBA, and Tactical.” (online)
- “Mounted patrol is a luxury. RPD has too many people in non patrol roles.” (online)

2. Reduce funding or shift to preventive programs

- “Divert money to preventive or proactive measures – youth services, youth employment.” (SE)
- “Re-direct funding from uniformed police to organizations such as Pathways to Peace.” (NW)
- “Increase bike patrols.” (NE)
- “Explore civilianizing administrative functions in RPD currently performed by uniformed personnel.” (NE)
- “Review RPD operations to determine what can be civilianized with retirements.” (SE)
- “Stop renting building space. Limit to 2 central locations for police stations in the city.” (SE)
- “Back to substations – help neighbors to feel safer.” (NW)
- “Better control of overtime.” (NW)
- “Charge promoters the actual cost of police presence.” (NW)
- “Defer the recruit class.” (SW)
- “Hire part-time police officers.” (SW)
- “Tie the size of the police force to the size of the population.” (SW)

3. Don’t cut Police

- “No cuts.” (SE)
- “Do not eliminate patrol officers.” (NW)
- “With our crime rate I can’t see reducing the police force.” (online)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

Police Services (n=32)	Votes	% of respondents
Eliminate Mounted Patrol (includes 7 officers) (-\$776,900)	9	28%
Defer the sole planned recruit class (-\$614,700)	9	28%
Reduce Special Operations (tactical) (4 officers) (-\$388,700)	5	16%
Reduce Special Investigations by 1 Investigator (-\$127,400)	5	16%
Reduce Patrol (4 officers) (-\$388,700)	3	9%
<i>Note: Online survey participants could select multiple items, so details add to more than 100%.</i>		

Table Topic 3: Fire Services

Consistent feedback on this topic was to avoid any cuts to Firefighters and Fire Companies, but instead to reduce overtime and administrative positions.

Themes from Participants

1. Do not make cuts to Fire Services

- “Do not close one Fire Company.” (SE)
- “Do not cut Fire, they are always the first responders on scene.” (NW)
- “No cuts to RFD, they’ve already cut on-duty staffing 10% in last 5 years. Make cuts to those not on the trucks.” (online)
- “Fire Department has been cut to the bone. No more cuts!” (online)

2. Address overtime, other operational changes

- “City take over EMS and transport to hospital.” (NW)
- “Delay vehicle replacements for Fire and Police.” (NW)
- “Obtain reimbursement from health insurance for EMS calls.” (SW)
- “Close one Fire Company and distribute Firefighters to other companies to reduce overtime from \$2.5M.” (online)
- “No Firefighter should make over \$150,000 – reduce overtime.” (online)
- “Cut high level administrative positions/Deputy Chief positions.” (online)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

Fire services (n=32)	Votes	% of respondents
Eliminate one vacant Battalion Chief position, one clerical position (-\$192,000)	16	50%
Reduce RFD force by 16 Firefighters (close one Fire Company) (-\$1,257,300)	5	16%

Table Topic 4: Pensions—Response to Increasing Expense

Participants were not as engaged on this topic as others, so no overarching themes were apparent. However, a number of comments follow and it appears there is general support for smoothing the cost of pensions under one of the options offered by the state for 2013-14.

Comments from Participants

- “Set up a City-run pension fund investment program (self-insurance).” (NW)
- “Do not cut pensions – people have worked with the expectation of receiving the pension in retirement.” (SW)
- “Amortize pension costs.” (SW)
- “That’s what reserves are for.” (online)
- “It’ll go back down in a few years. Use the reserves and explore smoothing.” (online)
- “No pay raises for three years.” (online)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

Pensions: Response to Increasing Expense (n=32)	Votes	% of respondents
Opt in to state plan for smoothing of the rate (defers \$19.6 million)	14	44%
Amortize pension costs with the state at a rate of 3% (defers \$16.5 million)	10	31%
Use some of the City's pension reserves (total pension reserves = \$16 million)	10	31%

Note: Online survey participants could select multiple items, so details add to more than 100%.

Table Topic 5: Infrastructure, Public Facilities, Neighborhood Real Estate

Online participants agreed that the City should defer cash capital for public art (63%) and for Lake Avenue construction (50%). Participants in all quadrants saw the value of deferring some capital projects, though the selection of projects to defer or eliminate varied. Some felt capital dollars should be more focused on housing or youth needs.

Themes from Participants

1. Defer capital projects

- “Defer roads and sidewalk construction at Midtown site.” (NE)
- “Support deferral of all capital items, except playground apparatus.” (SE)
- “Defer Lake Ave maintenance; we’ve already done a lot there.” (NW, SW)
- “Flat population growth supports reduction in housing money.” (SE)
- “Do not cut public art funding.” (SE)
- “Get rid of the art show, ask RCSD to donate student art.” (SW)

- “Cancel the boondoggles that are the Marina and Broad St Canal. You are seriously reducing police officers, closing fire houses, raising taxes, cutting services etc. and you are going ahead with building a marina and re-watering a section of Broad St.?” (online)

2. Mixed feelings on the soccer stadium, other facilities

- “Allow citizen groups to hold events at stadium and pay a fee.” (SE)
- “Sell the stadium” (SE); “Keep the stadium” (SE)
- “Hold the East End festival at the soccer stadium.” (SW)
- “Get better management at stadium.” (SW)
- “Reduce Clean Sweep to one event – not during Lilac Festival.” (SW)
- “NSC offices should have reduced hours during the day, more evening hours.” (SW)
- “Sell City Hall parking lot to private developer at market value.” (online)

3. Redirect capital funds to housing and youth

- “Transfer capital funding to recreation programs.” (NE)
- “Do not reduce funds for Rec centers or playgrounds.” (SW)
- “Kids who are kicked out of Recreation Centers have nowhere to go.” (NW)
- “The NE looks like a war zone; we need the right kind of housing there.” (NW)
- “Need demolitions with a plan.” (NW)
- “Need new subsidized housing.” (NW)

4. Cut Clean Sweep but find ways to keep the city clean

- “Cut Clean sweep but redirect funding to block clubs.” (NW)
- “Instead of Clean Sweep, work on ordinances that require homeowners to keep their properties maintained and fine them if they don't. We can't keep asking people to volunteer to clean up the city.” (online)
- “We still need to keep up on repairs and maintenance for not only safety reasons, but also to improve the look of downtown and our neighborhoods. We need to attract new people and companies.” (online)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

Infrastructure, Public Facilities, and Neighborhood Real Estate (n=32)	Votes	% of respondents
Defer planned cash capital for public art (-\$120,000)	20	63%
Defer Lake Avenue reconstruction (-\$1,504,000)	16	50%

Reduce capital funding for market rate housing development and Focused Investment (-\$1,000,000)	13	41%
Reduce capital funding for real estate acquisition and economic development (-\$500,000)	12	38%
Close the Sahlen's stadium (-\$534,000)	9	28%
Reduce capital funding for downtown development activities (-\$600,000)	9	28%
Reduce investigation & remediation of properties with environmental concerns (-\$647,000)	8	25%
Reduce Clean Sweep events from four to one, but still provide assistance to neighborhood groups (-\$21,000)	8	25%
Reduce inspection staff for code compliance activities (-\$114,200)	6	19%
Defer rehabilitation, renovation, repair to playground apparatus (-\$585,000)	6	19%
Defer Tree Maintenance Program (-\$721,000)	5	16%
<i>Note: Online survey participants could select multiple items, so details add to more than 100%.</i>		

Table Topic 6: Youth and Library Neighborhood Services

As in prior years, participants strongly agree that Recreation Centers and Libraries should not be closed. While some online survey participants thought we could merge the functions with the school district or reduce the number of facilities, all of those who attended in person were in favor of maintaining or even increasing these city resources. Durand Beach saw less support, with most participants agreeing it should be closed.

Themes from Participants

1. Libraries and Recreation Centers are a valuable part of our community

- “Keep Libraries and Rec Centers open.” (NE)
- “Do not close Recreation Center or Libraries.” (SE)
- “Develop more combination Rec Centers/Libraries/Schools like Ryan Center.” (NE)
- “Definitely do not close a single library.” (NW)
- “Do not reduce Rec Centers; increase resources at Rec Centers.” (NW)
- “Look into declaring Libraries and Rec Centers public right of way so maintenance is a service similar to sidewalk plowing and refuse removal.” (NW)
- “There should be no cuts to youth services; in fact the City should invest more in at-risk youth services.” (SW)
- “Should be more collaboration between Rec Centers, schools, and libraries.” (SW)
- “If you want to keep kids off the streets, you need the Rec Centers and libraries.” (online)

2. Close Durand Beach services

- “Close the Beach.” (NE)
- “Close Durand – do not see value of keeping it open.” (SE)
- “Have Durand open only on weekends.” (SE)
- “Close Durand Eastman Beach.” (SW)
- “Close Durand.” (NW)
- “Keep Durand open but impose usage fees.” (NW)

3. Close or reduce these services (online comments)

- “Evaluate use of the library system; with e-books it may be possible to combine libraries.” (online)
- “Too many Rec Centers; merge them into RCSD.” (online)
- “It is incumbent on all parents to provide their own recreation for their children.” (online)
- “Rec Centers are of little use. Let the church groups pick up the slack if there is an actual need.” (online)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

	Votes	% of respondents
Youth and Library Neighborhood Services (n=32)		
Close one recreation center, eliminate staff (-\$350,000)	12	38%
Close Durand Eastman Beach (-\$185,400)	12	38%
Close one library, eliminate staff (-\$350,000)	6	19%
<i>Note: Online survey participants could select multiple items.</i>		

Table Topic 7: Federal Funding for CDBG and HOME

Some felt these federal funds should be used more efficiently or more flexibly, but comments did not center around any specific themes.

Themes from Participants

1. Use funds more efficiently

- “Use HOME and CDBG funds more efficiently for housing rehab; determine whether for-profits or not-for-profits spend less to achieve same results.” (SW)
- “Obtain more flexibility from HUD on how block grant funds are used.” (NW)

- “Reduce economic development loans and grants by same percentage as federal reduction.” (SE)
- “Reduce capital funding for market rate housing and move funds to programs funded by federal funds such as the lead program.” (SE)
- “Consolidate services.” (NE)
- “Let the Fire Department use the 2% fund to purchase equipment.” (online)
- “Public assistance programs must go first.” (online)

2. Focus on neighborhood needs

- “Do not cut neighborhood planning.” (NW)
- “Need more services and businesses in the NE.” (NE)
- “How about postponing or eliminating the Port of Rochester Marina project.” (online)

3. Be more transparent

- “Should be more transparency in using economic development grants and loans; appears to go to businesses who least need it, but who know it’s available.” (SW)
- “Target and track the investment of federal funds.” (NW)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

Federal Funding Reductions & Sequestration (n=32)	Votes	% of respondents
Five percent CDBG Fund Reduction (-\$392,000). Reduce funding for: Emergency Assistance Repair Program, rehab and resale of housing to low-income families, lead rehabilitation funding, youth programs, economic development grants and loans, fire department equipment.	12	38%
Five percent HOME Fund Reduction (-\$94,000). Reduce funding for: housing development, affordable housing, buyer assistance, homebuyer training.	11	34%
Reduce assistance for Housing for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA) (-\$35,000)	8	25%
Five percent Emergency Shelter Grant Reduction (-\$38,000)	6	19%
<i>Note: Online survey participants could select multiple items, so details may add to more than 100%.</i>		

Table Topic 8: Organizational Efficiencies

Since the reductions proposed in this section do not affect services, citizens generally agree that the reductions should be made. A number of additional suggestions were made to evaluate various staffing configurations from reducing the size of City Council to engaging more volunteers at recreation centers and libraries to requiring one week of furlough for employees. Other participants suggested the City look at merging or outsourcing selected services, and looking to technology to find more efficiencies.

Themes from Participants

1. Evaluate staffing structure

- “Negotiate schedule shifts – for example, have refuse on alternating rolling cycle for holiday weeks to reduce OT (see Columbus OH).” (SE)
- “Job sharing – instead of engaging retirees for part-time positions, split one full-time position into two half-time positions (retain pension benefits).” (SE)
- “Reduce budget for City Council and Clerk by reducing the number of Council members. Erie and Buffalo have reduced their numbers.” (SE)
- “Freeze salaries.” (SE)
- “Implement one week of furlough for all employees.” (SW)
- “Zoning staff and code enforcement staff should all be run out of NSC offices.” (SW)
- “All city employees should take a 1% decrease in pay.” (online)

2. Evaluate service levels

- “Cut subsidy to soccer stadium.” (NE)
- “Use the soccer stadium for Section V champion ships, concerts, other.” (NW)
- “Can’t not-for-profits pay some taxes?” (NW)
- “Reduce the cost of the Office of Public Integrity – it is too expensive for the results it produces.” (NW)
- “Cut the Office of Public Integrity.” (SW)
- “Cut the [proposed] downtown Police Station.” (NW)
- “Delay the training for the finance system.” (SW)
- “Engage more volunteers and libraries and rec centers.” (SW)
- “Set up Code for Rochester program: <http://codeforamerica.org> to look for efficiencies.” (SW)
- “Reduce personal, vacation, sick time given to City employees.” (online)
- “Distribute workloads more effectively...people in each department are handling workload of two or three, while other people are only 50% busy.” (online)

3. Merge/outsource services

- “Eliminate Municipal Violations office and send those cases to Rochester City Court.” (NE)
- “Merge services with county in employment services for re-entry programs, Mounted Patrol, Municipal Violations, property assessment, GIS mapping.” (SE)
- “Merge with the county on code compliance.” (SW)

- “Have schools run rec centers, where possible combine programming.” (SW)
- 4. Use technology and new processes to find efficiencies.**
- “NSCs provide valuable services, but don’t need four locations; use branded emails (e.g., enforcementNW@cityofrochester.gov).” (SE)
 - “Increase use of requests for proposal and competitive sourcing of materials, supplies, equipment.” (SE)
 - “Outsource IT functions such as e-mail to Google.” (SW)

Online Votes on Proposed Changes

Organizational Efficiencies (n=32)	Votes	% of respondents
Reduce Heat/Light/Power costs as a result of a new energy agreement (-\$520,000)	25	78%
Cash capital reduction for small equipment/materials, deferral of cement truck replacement (-\$263,000)	17	53%
Savings due to completion of 2012 real estate reassessment (-\$42,500)	17	53%
Reduce Law Department costs for legal fees and professional services (-\$60,300)	16	50%
Reduce professional fees in Communications (-\$37,000)	16	50%
Eliminate two vacant positions in 311, and reduce Public Safety Aide hours (-\$48,300)	15	47%
Personnel efficiencies in Department of Human Resources (-\$41,500)	15	47%
Personnel efficiencies in Environmental Services due to turnover (-\$80,500)	14	44%
Re-organize Neighborhood Service Center personnel (-\$74,600)	14	44%
Library staff re-organization and efficiencies (-\$113,100)	13	41%
Reduce Communications services and special events office (-\$18,000)	10	31%
Reductions in new hires background check costs (-\$25,000)	10	31%
Delay Phase II training for new finance system (-\$170,300)	10	31%
<i>Note: Online survey participants could select multiple items, so details may add to more than 100%.</i>		

Thank you to the following City employees who volunteered their time to assist in the Voice of the Citizen Sessions:

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