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Efficiencies to be created internally

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star
Tuesday, October 25, 2016 3:34:55 EDT PM



City councillors said they would not support a resolution calling for a third-party review of the Public Works and Transportation department.

The motion was penned by Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker and seconded by Ward 5 Coun. Frank Fata.

The only support received for the resolution was from Mayor Christian Provenzano.

Three councillors were absent from Monday's meeting – Sandra Hollingsworth, Lou Turco and Joe Krmpotich.

Shoemaker, who raised a similar motion last year calling for a committee of council to conduct the review, did not have any support for the move last year either.

Shoemaker said that the significant fiscal challenges of the year meant that council needs to look for more savings in the budget.

While he realizes those savings won't be found until well after the 2017 budget is passed, he argued the PWT makes up about 25% of the city's overall budget.

Last year, PWT commissioner Larry Girardi found more than \$500,000 of savings in the budget, some that were a result of cutbacks to bus service and sidewalk plowing.

Shoemaker said council has already made some tough decisions which impact the budget. They include realigning Fire and EMS services; getting out of the daycare business and changing the senior management team and responsibilities.

He argued this is a necessary step to determine whether further savings can be found.

"It's not a desirable position to be in . . . but unfortunately that's where we are at," Shoemaker said.

Ward 5 Coun. Marchy Bruni said he wouldn't support the resolution because he wants senior staff to determine what, if any, efficiencies can be found.

As well, he said, he doesn't want to spend the money for an outside consultant to conduct the review, especially after freezing non-unionized salaries and saving \$227,000.

"Let's give our experts, our staff, a chance to come back to us," Bruni said.

Ward 2 Coun. Susan Myers said that public works and transportation is a core service that is provided to residents and one that citizens want.

"I do not want to spend money on this until I'm convinced that senior staff can't make cuts on its own," she said.

Ward 4 Coun. Rick Niro added that if any consultants were hired, the review would have to be done city wide, not just for one department.

The need to get an employee incentive plan in place is paramount, said Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian.

"Employees know where the efficiencies, not cuts, can be made and result in savings," he said.

City council will hear presentations from outside agencies on Nov. 3.

It will receive a preliminary budget report on Nov. 21 and then debate and finalize the 2017 budget on Dec. 5 and 6.

Council already knows the city could face a \$3 million deficit and, despite budget tightening measures, the full amount is not expected to be recouped by year end.

Discretionary spending was halted earlier in the year.

The city finds itself in the cash-strapped position because Essar Steel Algoma, currently in the midst of its Companies Creditors' Arrangement Act restructuring, has not paid its 2016 post-filing tax bills, owing the city about \$21 million.

Money has already been drawn from various reserve accounts with the intent of returning those funds once paid by the steelmaker, but there is no guarantee the city will recoup all of those tax dollars -- or any -- despite expectations that it is a priority lien holder in the process.

