

# *City of Alexandria, Virginia*

## MEMORANDUM

DATE: MARCH 8, 2010

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO #6: PUBLIC COMMENTS RECEIVED VIA OMB'S  
ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARD AND CONTACT US AS OF MARCH 5, 2010

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From November 15, 2009 to March 5, 2010 the City has received 27 public comments from 24 individuals (some people posted more than one comment) concerning the FY 2011 budget. Of the 27 comments, 19 were posted on the online discussion board and 8 were submitted solely through the Contact-Us system (some Contact-Us comments were also posted on the online discussion board).

Topics discussed range from the tax rate and employee compensation to the Alexandria Library and Affordable Housing. The comments are broken down by the issue they mostly address. Please note that when comments discuss a variety of issues, these comments are grouped in Attachment I into the main issue discussed.

Please note that as opposed to the Contact-Us system where a full name and address are required, users of the online discussion board are allowed to post using a user name. Due to their conversational nature, it may be beneficial to view the online comment board comments in chronological order. To view the online comments in the order they were posted please visit <http://alexandriava.gov/budgetcomments>.

A follow-up memo will be submitted to Council prior to the April 6, 2010 council work session on the preliminary add-delete list. This memo will include any new comments on the FY 2011 budget received between March 5, 2010 and the preliminary add/delete work session.

ATTACHMENT:  
Comments Organized by Topic

**Attachment I:  
Comments Organized by Topic**

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**ACPS**

**First Name:** Matthew  
**Last Name:** Ries  
**Date:** 1/16/10  
**City:** Alexandria  
**State:** VA  
**Subject:** FY2011 budget input  
To: Mayor Euille, Vice-Mayor Donley, and the City Council  
CC: City Manager

Hartmann and ACPS Superintendent Sherman  
In recent months, you have asked for citizen input on the FY2011 city and ACPS budget. Since they are inextricably linked, we are providing input on both. We have lived in Alexandria since moving to the DC area in 1996. We own a home in Del Ray and have two kids, the first entering ACPS in 2011. One of us works in Alexandria at an association and the other works part-time in DC. We are fortunate to both presently be employed during this recession, but at least one will not be receiving a salary increase this year and with very modest wage increases in the past few years, it has been challenging keeping our personal budget balanced. Without an ability to raise our personal income by simply changing a tax percentage (as the city is considering), we are balancing our household budget through smarter spending, belt tightening, and postponing some purchases than can be put off for the time being. We simply ask the city to do the same – balance the budget through smarter spending, not raising your revenues by increased taxes on your citizens or business owners.

The city was able to balance its budget when annual budgets were rising during the last decade. Homeowner (and presumably business) tax rates have been rising over the past few years. This tells me that the city used to manage a smaller budget with lower tax rates. The difference now? Presumably, additional services and programs were added or expanded during the “good years” that we can no longer afford with current revenue levels. With increased taxes on Alexandria residents, there will be less money left over at the end of the month (or one is further in the red each month). To make up that gap, we hold back our discretionary spending. For us, that means going out to eat less, not purchasing a gift we would have otherwise, cutting back on certain groceries, or not going out to the movies as examples. Since we are a family that lives and shops in Alexandria, all of these cutbacks have direct impacts on Alexandria businesses and their bottom line, hiring practices, and tax revenues paid back to the city. Increasing taxes on your residents simply takes money from one pot, but decreases another. While our input on the city budget is more general in nature, we have two specific recommendations for the made of ACPS students that were not residents of the city and their drain on the system’s resources. Addressing this issue seems like a relatively straightforward way to diminish the stresses of increasingly crowded schools, help alleviate budget shortfalls, and ensure that Alexandria

taxpayers' contributions are being used to educate the children of our city, not those of surrounding jurisdictions. Second, we suggest the city cease printing public documents in multiple languages. While we understand this city's position regarding immigrants, it is important for immigrants to assimilate into this country. That includes learning English. It seems a simple cost-savings to print documents in English, saving on materials, while encouraging immigrants to learn English. On a different note, we were encouraged to read about potential public-private-partnerships as an alternative approach to address the need for school construction, budget shortfalls, and smart growth. We hope ACPS and the city continues to pursue "out of the box" thinking to address our city's challenges.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Matthew and Lora Ries

## **Affordable Housing**

**First Name:** James

**Last Name:** Hoben

**Date:** 3/3/10

**City:** Alexandria

**State:** VA

**Subject:** 2011 Budget Hearing 03-10-10

**Comments:**

March 3, 2010

Mayor Euille and Members of Council I am James Hoben, formerly Co-chair of Housing Action, presently a continuing supporter of Housing Action's commitment to preserving Alexandria' affordable housing. The aggressive preservation of our remaining affordable housing is of vital importance to the City. The loss of affordable housing has been extreme. Between 2000-2000 approximately one half (10,000 units) of the City's privately owned by affordable rentals were lost. It is also projected that up to 1,000 publicly assisted but non ARHA, non- resolution 830 units face potential loss in the next five years. Maintaining an aggressive affordable housing preservation program is central to Alexandria's future for three reasons. First, it is vital to for the functioning of our business, education, health and governmental community, Second, it is central to keeping our homeless numbers modest, and third, it is central to our City commitment to rich diversity and culture. Failure to maintain our remaining affordable housing stock will be an immense future cost to the City. The cost of preservation is a fraction of the cost of new affordable housing construction. Specifically, I urge two actions by the Council: 1) Restore the formally dedicated \$502,060 in real estate tax revenue to an effective program of affordable housing preservation. Preservation was the highest priority recommendation of the City's blue ribbon Affordable Housing Initiatives Work Group. As you all know, affordable housing is key to the City's new Strategic Vision Goals 1 & 7. 2) Commit to finding new sources of predictable and dedicated revenues for affordable housing that complement what the Council may provide from the property tax. Create a task force to identify what other communities within and without Virginia have done to establish such revenue streams. Examine all alternatives. For example, look into adding a small fee/tax to water/sewer bills, electric, telephone or internet services. Investigate the possibility that an overdue increase in the State gasoline tax should include a small portion dedicated to community affordable housing to reduce the long car commutes by moderate and lower paid households, Re-examine the possibilities of a fractional percent on the restaurant meals tax or real estate transfer actions for affordable housing. I'm sorry to not be present at your hearing but I am in California on March 10, 2010.

James Hoben

**First Name:** Mary

**Last Name:** Riley

**City:** Alexandria

**State:** VA

**Subject:** Affordable Housing-Proposed Reductions

I am sorry that I am not able to attend the budget public hearing on March 10; however, I would like to register my disappointment in the significant reduction (\$502,060) of the real estate tax dedicated for affordable housing initiatives. Having attended some of the Council's strategic planning sessions with the community, I was hopeful that those items delineated as critical strategic plan goals and initiatives would be targeted as high-priority items in the budget. Thus, I was disturbed to see the significant reduction for affordable housing initiatives. It makes me question the meaning of the strategic plan. With the proposed cut, we will be far from meeting the City's strategic objective to "promote a continuum of affordable housing opportunities for all residents, especially those most in need." (Strategic Goal 7, Objective 1) As Chair of the Community Services Board (CSB) for the past several years, I saw first-hand the inefficiencies created by the lack of affordable housing opportunities for those CSB clients currently living in CSB-operated group homes and apartments who are now ready to move out and into their own units. This logjam in the housing pipeline for persons with disabilities means that clients who need a roof over their heads, as well as supportive services, are unable to access those services. Knowing the importance of preserving and increasing affordable housing units in the City, I am dismayed that such a significant reduction is being proposed and ask that you (1) ensure that funding is provided for this purpose and (2) follow the recommendations proposed by Herb Cooper-Levy and others in Housing Action for the creation of a high level Housing Commission that would provide improved coordination between the City, ARHA and nonprofit housing organizations.

Thank you for your consideration.

Mary Riley

## **Alexandria Library:**

In looking at the proposed budget, I would like to call attention to the suggested reduction of library branch hours.

For several reasons, I believe this will have a detrimental impact on our community. The local library branches provide an invaluable community service open and available to all residents. I can clearly remember the circulation staff leaning over the desk to see me looking up at them at 5 years old to encourage my early literacy and curiosity. Now, 35 years later, I have my own curious 5-year old and the staff is still there peering over the desk to greet her personally. When she says to the librarian, "How are cars made" or "I want books about animals that work" or "How many planets are there" we inevitably come away with a stack of books selected specifically and appropriately for her.

As a working parent, I often walk to the library in the evening with my child for storytime, seeking answers to her questions, or without my child to volunteer shelving books. The suggestion in the budget that library patrons can simply visit Beatley instead for evening hours is unrealistic and counter to the Eco-city Alexandria initiative. The staff there would be over-worked, the parking is insufficient, and I would never fight rush hour traffic as an alternative to walking to my local branch.

Cutting these hours would eliminate evening programs such as author talks, book groups, and some children's storytimes. These evening storytimes are the only ones I can attend with my child.

The amount of the budget cut that this proposed reduction in hours produces is \$173,000, less than \$1.50 for each Alexandria resident. The vast majority are library cardholders. The impact of reduced hours seems disproportionate the amount of the budget cut achieved.

On a recent visit as I was checking out with only three minutes until closing, there were still families in the children's section, a person at each computer, adults browsing the stacks, and tables full of patrons. That's the kind of community I want to live in.

[Susan Doherty \(110\)](#) | User | March 3, 2010 - 2:41 PM

## **Arts Funding:**

would favor continuing our arts programs and especially the arts grants programs which allow our community to attract visitors and drives our economic progress. Arts make Alexandria a more livable community and promotes our community progress through education, entertainment and revenues into the City's coffers.

[Ross Simons \(76\)](#) | User | January 20, 2010 - 3:31 PM

## **Employee Compensation:**

@ Mish, you sir really need to do some research before you make comments on a board. First of all, our pension cost the city less now that we moved to a defined benefit plan than it did previously. And guess what, we are also paying for it. The employees put 10% of their salaries into it, plus, we had to give back all the money we had in our previous retirement accounts to the city. For some that amounted from \$50,000 to upwards of \$600,000. Im tired of citizens complaining about their taxes and "our taxes pay your salaries". The amount you actually pay for my benefits and salary is negligable. Ill give you your 1 cent back. We all pay taxes just like you, yet we don't complain about it. It would amaze you to see just how much the city takes away from us for insurance, benefits like medical and dental, retirement, etc. I worked in the private sector and did much better than I did in this job, but I do like helping and serving the public. The problem is, Alexandria doesn't care much about its employees and the more I hear from people like you, the more I see the citizens don't care much about us either.

So, the next time you see a trash collector picking up the garbage from your broken bags in the alley. Or animal control trying to rescue your dog that got out of your yard and is causing a traffic hazard, or the parking enforcement officer who gets assaulted because some idiot parked in front of a fire hydrant. You tell them they get paid too much. Or how about the fireman who gets hurt at a house fire because some irresponsible person fell asleep with a lit cigarette in their hands. Or the police officer who (like in 2006) has to swim into rushing water at telegraph road to rescue 4 people trapped in top of a pickup because they thought they could drive through 8 feet of water. The officer had to fight logs, fences, large trash containers and other moving vehicles to get to them and pull them out safely. Then afterwards, they get assaulted by the same people they rescued. Why don't you walk up to them and tell them they all get paid too much and don't deserve more. Or why don't you ask the Alexandria Attorney who was kidnapped from his home at gunpoint by three people posing as federal agents. They did this in front of his family, then drove him to where they dug a grave in the woods where they planned on killing him. The officers were able to find him and rescue him prior to anything bad happening. Ask him if you think they get paid too much.

Whos going to do all this? YOU. I Doubt it very much. Unfortunately the services that you enjoy and take for granted in this city cost money. Public safety, trash, schools, parks, recreation, etc. It all cost money. Where is that money supposed to come from? donations? The reality is that the money comes from all of us. We all pay taxes and we all have to foot the bill. The solution is not to take away from the employees who work harder for less. The solution is to stop Government waste and spending. And how does that happen? elect people who won't spend money on useless things like the alexandria trolley and instead, spend it on the basis services that keep the city running.

Are you aware that our police department that was built in 1988 is sinking into the ground? Well back then when it was built on a floating slab they could have fixed the issue for under \$200,000. Now its costing millions to fix that building, plus they are spending \$80 Million to build a new department. Just an example of the cities waste.

[alsofedup \(113\)](#) | User | March 5, 2010 - 9:27 AM

@mish

I have been with the City for almost 22 years. I love my job and the fact that I am able to make a difference. However, I don't like the idea of having to work overtime or secondary employment in order to make ends meet. I'm not talking about being able to afford fancy vacations, cars or a big house. I'm talking about food on my table and gas in my vehicle. When I first started with the City in 1988 there was a pay scale and we knew what we would be making next year as long as we did a good job and got a merit increase. I would love to be able to live in the City in which I serve. It is not feasible, I can't afford even a studio apartment here.

During the snow many of us stayed in the City to be here for you, leaving our own families for days on end. We understand that we will be at times working days, evenings, nights, weekends and holidays, missing anniversaries, birthdays, children's ballgames and recitals, etc. You call, we answer. You said that we should go into the private sector with our marketable skills, I can't tell you how many good employees we have lost to other jurisdictions and the private sector. The City needs to be competitive in order to retain current employees and get new employees that will stay with the City. We aren't asking for the entire pie just a slice so that we can live above poverty.

[tired \(115\)](#) | User | March 4, 2010 - 9:18 PM

@Mish

So because we are public servants, the City should be allowed to balance the budget on our backs each year? Please be reasonable. We have the same expenses you do and the same families to support during the same tight economic times you are experiencing.

For 10+ years, the City has cried poverty when it comes to compensating employees. New programs and services were implemented for citizens that many other jurisdictions do not provide. The level of service in Alexandria is unparalleled in any other surrounding county or city. As both a former employee of a neighboring jurisdiction and a former Alexandria resident, I can tell you that you get a heck of a lot for your taxes in Alexandria. The caliber of the teachers in the schools, the cleanliness of the City, the maintenance of your parks, the technology available on the City's website – all of these services rank well above any other neighboring jurisdiction. For this level of service, you would think that City employees would also be one of the highest paid in the DC metro area.

Wrong. We are the lowest. When Fairfax, Arlington, Montgomery and Loudoun were giving 4 & 5% COLAs to employees in 2004 and 2005, we were given half of what they received. Fairfax employees were receiving (at one point), almost 7% higher raises a year than Alexandria. The Federal Government consistently pays almost 5% more each year to employees. Alexandria

City Government refuses to be competitive with area jurisdictions. So we will continue to have vacancies, work short staffed, do more with less and we will continue to maintain the same level of service for YOU. We've done this for almost three years with no raises.

But enough is enough. The employees are stretched to capacity, both professionally and personally. There are people who work for the City doing two and three jobs in a 12 hour work day (who also drive one hour each way to work!). There are people who work for the City who have had the same position for 20 years and have never had their position reclassified, rewritten or upgraded. There are people who work for the City who can't make ends meet so they leave City Hall each night to drive to a second job (many of these people have college degrees or professional certificates). These people are struggling because the City would rather invest money in buying more trolleys or having a poet laureate on staff.

The City workforce is fed up with being the last in line to get whatever crumbs are left over. We can't live in the City because it's too expensive. So we drive longer, pay more for gas and transportation and see our families less so that we can serve YOU. And we do this with a smile; we do this because we are public servants.

[FedUp \(114\)](#) | User | March 4, 2010 - 8:05 PM

"None of us get into public service to get rich but we should at least be compensated fairly."

i would hope you got into public service to serve the public, and that everything else is secondary. otherwise you shouldn't be in public service and you shouldn't think it's "fair" to shoulder taxpayers with wages, benefits, and pensions that they neither enjoy nor afford.

[mish \(102\)](#) | User | March 4, 2010 - 3:53 PM

This is directed @MISH.

You said, "Alexandria City employees receive "Market Competitiveness Threshold Adjustments" of 100% but other local jurisdictions only receive:

95% in Arlington  
90% in Fairfax County  
95% (guideline only) in Prince William County"

This is true. We are supposed to be paid at 100% of the midpoint of 5 surrounding jurisdictions (you take the 5 jurisdictions, see who has the highest and lowest and we get paid at the middle) Problem is, we aren't anywhere close to that. We are about 16-20% behind where the city promised us we would be. If you read David Lords second paragraph maybe you will understand better. Fairfax starts out at \$15,000 more than we do so their 90% is still much better than our 100%. I haven't had a COLA in 3 years, no merrit increase in 2 years with the city telling us we will be getting no more raises for the next 5 years. How are we supposed to live and support our families? None of us get into public service to get rich but we should at least be compensated fairly. We have police officers that qualify for public housing, yet you think we all get paid too much. Also, some of us didn't want to move to the defined benefit plan, it was forced on us by the city

[.spark \(113\)](#) | User | March 4, 2010 - 8:22 AM

Alexandria City employees receive "Market Competitiveness Threshold Adjustments" of 100%, but other local jurisdictions only receive:

95% in Arlington

90% in Fairfax County

95% (guideline only) in Prince William County

Alexandria City is clearly paying too much. How about 0% competitive market survey adjustment and let city employees test their marketable skillsets in the private sector like the rest of us?

The private sector is collapsing. Quit raising taxes and increasing fees. At this point, the problem is out of control spending and unaffordable promises (like the 2004 decision to move to a "defined benefit" pension system during the height of the free money credit bubble).

It is past time to cut services and reform the public pension system.

[mish \(102\)](#) | User | February 23, 2010 - 10:26 AM

'Defined benefit' pension risk is open-ended. Dump it for a 'defined contribution' plan.

[mish \(102\)](#) | User | February 16, 2010 - 12:32 PM

## **General Comments:**

Can the Staff and City Council explain why it takes 31 city employees to support 1000 residents while state-wide the ratio is 14 government workers, not including Federal workers, per thousand residents?

<http://www2.census.gov/govs/apes/08stva.txt>

Bite the bullet and start eliminating paying positions. Fifty of the 67 positions recently eliminated were empty: real result was a reduction of 17, not 67. That's about a .4% reduction.

And I think voters will see through attempts to make cuts that cause the most visible pain to citizens - kind of like closing the Washington Monument to cut the deficit.

[Joseph Judson Smith, III \(90\)](#) | User | February 21, 2010 - 7:08 PM

The city manager's proposed budget of \$534 million dollars is outrageous. Why are city leaders still governing as though the real estate bubble - with its inflated tax assessments and resultant tax revenues - still exists? The bubble burst, and it's time to burst the spending that it made possible. Use the pre-bubble 2000 budget as a baseline, adjust for population growth and inflation, and cap 2010 spending at \$415 million. It's doable, it's realistic. Get real, get to work and do the job we elected you to do!

[Brent Bahler \(105\)](#) | User | February 17, 2010 - 7:51 AM

**First Name:** Micheline

**Last Name:** Eyraud

**City:** Alexandria

**Date:** 1/31/10

**State:** VA

**Subject:** Budget

The article in this week's Gazette containing two full pages of city positions which pay more than \$100,000/year is especially timely and indicative of how spending has gotten out of hand. I am not encouraged by your recent actions to spend money for the sake of spending it (e.g., \$50K for a nonprofit web site development project and your insistence on buying trolleys for King Street). Perhaps you should walk down King and see all the empty storefronts and general lack of people walking up and down the street. At the same time during the last snow storm the plows were absent on many city streets (while the Transportation Director taking the day off). Interesting set of priorities. You need to determine what the city core functions are and realign personnel staffing. I suggest that the following positions could be eliminated without a great deal of impact to the core functions of city government: Office of Women (all personnel) Deputy City Manager (1) This leave two other people besides Jim Hartman mHistoric Alexandria - reduce personnel Director, Office of Citizens Assistance (Do we need to spend 138K per year for someone to answer the phone???) 1 Deputy Director position from the Transportation Department There are a number of positions which are overpaid: Directors: Recreational Parks & Cultural Activities and Deputy Director), Chief Librarian, Joblink Division, Social Services, Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court Services, Office of Early Child Development I would also

like to see some leadership in reining in the School System. We pay the most of any school district in the region and have a very poor standing statewide. How about making them institute a process whereby residence is verified each year (which everyone else in the region does)? Providing a false application for school enrollment should be a felony offense and ENFORCED.

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Thanks for the opportunity to provide you with comments on the 2011 budget for the City of Alexandria. Let me begin by saying that as a homeowner and former public servant I appreciate the effort that each of you put into managing our city. Over time I've been struck by how difficult, complicated and seemingly thankless your work is. Whether it is an elected or government position, public service does require a different mindset and perspective. Each of you should know that many of us are grateful for what you do, and what you try to do.

With that said, my comments only reflect my small window on budget management within the city. I've lived in the city for over 21 years and have served on the board of two homeowners associations, the Open Space Steering Committee, and the Northern VA Conservation Trust. Although my background is fairly broad-based my focus for many years has been parks, open space, outdoor recreation, fundraising and revenue generation. It is in these areas that I will offer some suggestions that might help you as you prepare and approve our budget.

First, everyone needs to know that governments like ours never have enough money. Although taxes, grants, fees, and other sources of money are considerable there is never enough money to do everything that needs to be done, when it needs to be done. By virtue of these limits some things are more important than others. I hope that you will continue to support the basic health and safety services the city provides. I also hope that you will refrain from funding new initiatives but rather put money toward protecting and maintaining things that we have now.

Second, perhaps as much as you need to cut services to meet your budget you also need to improve the management of your existing departments. Wasting money is probably worse than not having all the funds we need to do what needs to be done.

Over the last two years I've been encouraged by your managers to carry park, open space, health and safety problems to each of you. Over and over again city employees are reluctant to work with community interests on anything other than what they want to do. They often use a lack of time and, or money, as their rationale for saying no, dismissing ideas shared with them, or steering citizens toward you to solve problems. Unfortunately I have found that some of the city's agendas do not reflect community needs and interests, and these ideas have not been vetted publicly. A good number of these ideas are frankly wrong-headed and without concern for the public that these individuals are paid to serve.

Many of these bad decisions have resulted in projects and work that needs to be redone, and sometimes redone again, because of a lack of permits, poor or no planning, or a disregard for the interest of the public. On some occasions past Recreation Department directors have almost bragged about how more than 120 of the city's parks don't have plans and that in order to do a plan they need lots of money. Such a perspective makes it hard for me to understand how current and future funds for these areas can ever be invested wisely.

For example, the lack of up-to-date master plan for Fort Ward Park has cost the city funds that could have been better used protecting important historic resources and providing important recreation services. Park solid waste transfer stations and maintenance yards have been developed without permits and public input only to be relocated when these uses conflict with

neighbors, graves, laws, and common-sense. Drainage swales and ravines have been filled with soil, mulch, and debris without regard to the consequences of altering drainage areas and the cost of restoring these areas given they were filled without permits.

As we struggle to figure out how we can protect, maintain and provide services at parks like Fort Ward I see money given annually and non-competitively to non-profit organizations to promote the protection and acquisition of more city park land. Surely the goal of open space planning is one I support but is paying a consultant from outside the city to supplement city staff an effective way to achieve this goal?

I observe other efforts, such as the promotion of very large "special events" in parks under the guise of revenue generation. Although public agencies should look at ways to save money as well as generate revenue some of the city's revenue generation strategies, such as the ones at Fort Ward Park, have cost the city money rather than bring in new revenues. More often than not many public servants will try to pursue revenue generation without the knowledge, skills and expertise to successfully do so.

I've observed problems with maintenance in our parks, such as Chinguapin Park. I've observed that the city has been unable to maintain these areas due to budget cuts, but we have given a non-profit group a grant/ contract to sponsor invasive plant removal projects in that same area only to have the plants they have pulled remain in a pile at the entrance to the park trail for what is now six months.

Finally, the city managers, as well as some of you at times, seem to treat citizen interest and involvement in our park areas with a certain amount of resistance and on occasion contempt. Given that many of us know the demands that are placed on you and city staff we often try to give all of you some slack as you do your jobs. However, the tension that is created between some of your antagonistic city staff and the community they serve costs them and us time and money.

By driving away, or at least keeping the citizens at arms-length also costs the city funds in other ways. For example, I have repeatedly made offers to members of your Recreation Department to share my skills and experience in the areas of fundraising and revenue generation without a hint of interest or even willingness to listen. Whether it is disdain or a dismissive nature this behavior undermines a relationship that could help the city help itself to get things accomplished and save money.

In closing, please be sure that I appreciate what you do and I wish you success with the resolution of the budget. Please look to ways to eliminate wasteful spending, tap the unrealized potential of the citizenry, and bring substantive revenue sharing expertise into city government to help meet the financial challenges you face. Please do not, under any circumstances, raise our taxes to meet needs and perpetuate the waste which goes on now.

Thanks again for the chance to comment.

Glenn

Glenn Eugster  
4022 Ellicott Street  
Alexandria, VA 22304

[Glenn Eugster \(91\)](#) | User | January 27, 2010 - 2:57 PM

It is good to see that City Manager Jim Hartman is instituting a program of “collaborative realignment “. In private business, we would likely skip the fancy words and simply call such a program “common sense”. Given the stresses on the City Budget over the last few years, one can reasonably question why such operational inefficiencies weren’t addressed long ago. Regardless, it is an encouraging sign.

It would be cruel, damaging, and counterproductive to impose yet more tax increases on Alexandria homeowners and businesses as we struggle to climb out of the worst recession in recent memory. Obviously, making cuts in order to close gaps in the budget will cause a level of discomfort for the professional politicians that occupy our City government, but the Mayor and Alexandria City Council must learn to live within their means like any other American institution or individual.

Given the lack of imagination in the area of budget reductions expressed by our Mayor, I thought it would be appropriate to make a few suggestions as follows:

#### General Reform

1. Close City coffers to new programs. For example, the City shouldn’t even consider jumping into the financial morass (easily worth tens of millions of taxpayer dollars) associated with proposed street cars.
2. Transparency. Post all financial information, contracts, invoices, etc. on the City’s web site so we can see where our money is being spent. Of course, there should be some exceptions to this, such as payments associated with police investigations.
3. Zero Based Budgeting. Programs shouldn’t be funded just because they exist. Start from the ground up and justify costs on an annual basis. Weed out the bad and fertilize the good.
4. Litigation Board. Create a nonpartisan board of retired judges and lawyers to review all pending and future litigation involving the City. This volunteer board should be able to veto new and settle pending litigation. Each member should voluntarily agree to abstain from running for public office for five years beginning with the end of their service to the City.
5. Auditing Board. Create a nonpartisan board of auditors, business executives and individuals who have served in local governments outside of Alexandria to review operations and budgeting. These volunteers should also foreswear running for public office in Alexandria for five years at the end of their service.
6. Cease using the powers of the City as political weapons. It appears that the elected leadership doesn’t like business, especially if it deals with goods or services that some may consider “politically incorrect” such as fuel oil or high quality sporting weapons. After all, the elimination of one discreet, high end sporting goods store resulted in the unexpected opening of the first “adult” shop on King Street, with more to come.

#### Specific Programs

Here are a few items for immediate savings.

1. Terminate the “Safe Haven” Program. Though created with the best of intentions, this controversial, misguided, multi-million dollar program designed to provide luxury apartments in the heart of Old Town to a dozen homeless people is a gold plated monument to waste. As of this date, the poorly managed, over budget program has yet to service a single person.
2. Terminate the Sister City Program. Surely, Alexandria’s tourism industry benefits much more from its location at the step of our nation’s capital than association with a city an ocean away.
3. Terminate the iPod/key chain giveaway. Sure, it’s only \$30,000, but how many meals could that buy for the truly needy had the city left those dollars in the hands of charitable private citizens?
4. Verify that all public school students are legal residents of Alexandria. Transfer non-residents

to the appropriate school district, and fine the parents for the cost of the services provided by the City. Why should Alexandria taxpayers pay the tab for students sneaking in from other jurisdictions?

5. Terminate City participation in the NVTA. By any reasonable expectation, The Northern Virginia Transportation Authority (NVTA) has been an abject failure. Its finances were gutted as unconstitutional; its original "priority" projects met with ridicule from its closest allies as being politically motivated and ineffective; and even one of its staff members was arrested for allegedly defrauding the organization. There are better solutions for our transportation problems, beginning with cutting all support for this failure.

6. Planning and Zoning. Readers may recall that it was only a few months ago that Planning Director Faroll Hamer's arbitrary, capricious, or simply unreasonable actions in a recent land use case were overturned by the BZA. Now taxpayers deserve an answer to this question: why have staffing and other costs increased when economic activity, such as building, has declined? Replace Faroll Hamer with a professional urban planner, down size the staff and keep personal political agendas out of this office.

7. Divest of land holdings and leave the Old Dominion Boat Club alone. Instead of attacking an Alexandria institution with an unwarranted land grab, the city should focus on reducing its property holdings and improving management at existing locations.

Obviously, with a bloated budget that has grown so quickly over the past few years, there is plenty of room for additional reductions and no need to raise taxes yet again. Hopefully, the Mayor and City Council will be up to the task to make these decisions and do their jobs. Goodness knows, the taxpayers have done more than their fair share.

[Bud Miller \(61\)](#) | User | November 17, 2009 - 10:21 AM

To me the process is simple. We have had a nice growth over the majority of the last decade and now for the last 18 months we have contracted with further contractions expected, and hopefully the worst is over. In my opinion we should weigh in the current unemployment relative to where it was at the peak, the current revenues relative to the peak. The City's budget and employee numbers relative to the peak and make reductions through freezing hiring and initiatives until the 2011 budget is relative to the peak's budget (2008).

We made a run up during the growing economy and it is prudent to reduce during the slowed economy. Do like a prudent person, spend wisely across all needs and tighten your belt and eliminate non essential services.

Sincerely,

[Keith Hudkins \(60\)](#) | User | November 13, 2009 - 3:46 PM

## **King Street Trolley:**

**First Name:** Andrew

**Last Name:** Campanella

**Date:** 11/15/10

**City:** Alexandria

**State:** VA

**Subject:** Trolleys vs. Real Stimulus

Dear Mr. Mayor and Members of Council:

I am writing to strongly oppose the use of the City's stimulus money to purchase new trolleys for the City of Alexandria. While I understand the interest in making this purchase, and the potential benefits to tourism, using stimulus money for a project that will benefit a California manufacturer--and will take a year to materialize--seems capricious during these rough economic times.

As a small business owner who took the leap to start a company during this recession, I am painfully aware of the challenges that face entrepreneurs in our region. Finding affordable office space, despite the relatively high number of "For Rent" and "Out of Business" storefronts in Old Town, was extremely frustrating. Moreover, it is depressing to see our city see business after business close its doors. I respectfully propose a different solution than the trolley purchase--a solution that could truly stimulate our local economy and help small businesses start, grow, and thrive.

Instead of funneling money to a California manufacturer for new trolleys, the city should select 240 small business owners, artists, crafts-persons, or other entrepreneurs—ones with good business plans—and grant them each \$10,000 to partially cover the cost of one year's rent in a vacant Old Town storefront. I'm sure that many landlords and building owners would happily accept a one year, guaranteed lease payment of \$10,000 than no renter at all.

This immediate, small-business-focused stimulus could work. First, it would breathe new life into Old Town with new and dynamic small businesses, built with the help of start-up funding from the city's stimulus payment. If we can simply incentivize the creation of small businesses with free or reduced rent for a year, perhaps these businesses will eventually create new and good jobs, build sustainable profits, and improve our overall tax base. Moreover, building owners and landlords will receive money to pay the mortgages on their buildings, preventing, in some cases, defaults. While President Obama cautioned everyone that ARRA should be used to help "Main Street," I do not know if he truly meant improving the street itself through prettier trolleys. I find this proposal, while well-intentioned, misguided and fiscally inappropriate. Please reconsider this trolley strategy and focus on real stimulus that can make Alexandria the envy of the region when it comes to business growth. Sincerely,

Andrew

Campanella

There are three primary issues that I want to address with reference to the budget: the King Street trolley, employee compensation, and public safety budget cuts.

**The Trolley:** The trolley is a tremendous waste of public funds. The program should either be eliminated in its entirety or riders should be asked to pick up a portion of the operation costs. The savings should be redirected to other worthy transportation goals or projects consistent with this funding source. It is completely implausible to suggest that this project has had anything but a negligible impact on Old Town's economy. Does the City really believe that there are significant numbers of people out there that make the decision to come to Alexandria and spend money here for no other reason than because we have a free trolley? Moreover, the trolley

unfairly benefits businesses in a discreet part of King Street by shuttling people from the Metro to the waterfront. Meanwhile, the business owners on the West side of King Street who used to have pedestrians walk by their stores, now see everyone passing them by via their free trolley. Appropriations are often about public perception. What impression does the City leave people when our leaders say that we have to cut public safety positions but we are willing to let anybody take a free ride on the trolley to the tune of \$700,00 a year (not to include special proposed appropriations of a \$1 million to cover the purchase of cars and extended hours). The free trolley is insulting to hard-working City employee who are loosing their jobs because of the City's budget cuts and it is an insult to taxpayers who are being asked to pay higher bills to fund supposed "needs" like this in the City's budget.

Employee Compensation: For multiple years the employees of Alexandria have been asked to make sacrifices. No COLAs, no merit increases, etc. Wage stagnation will soon create a "brain drain" in this City as high-quality employees look for employment elsewhere. How can the City expect to attract good recruits to public safety positions when Fairfax County pays \$15,000 more for an average starting salary? Do we not risk having a City workforce that has less of a tie to the community in which they work because they can't afford to live in Alexandria? It is good that the City is, after years, finally proposing at least giving employees a merit increase next year. However, when that increase is consumed by inflation and by the City raising health insurance rates, how can that be said to acknowledge merit? I understand that employees will be asked to make sacrifices during lean times, but the City really needs to consider the long-term consequences on quality of service caused by these actions. Tying this back to the trolley, how insulting is it to employees to be asked to shoulder years of wage stagnation and higher insurance costs because the City has no fat in its budget, while the City spends money to operate a free shuttle? I understand that these costs come from different funding sources but the principle is the same – don't tell employees that they have to suffer through hardship because of the recession while wasting money elsewhere.

Public Safety Cuts: Finally, the cuts to the police department that target community police officers are very unfortunate. I can't help but believe that this will have a negative effect on the targeted communities. Community policing is effective and cutting these officers could create higher crime rates. Again, everyone understands that cuts are necessary in tough times. But if you are going tell neighborhoods that they have to risk higher crime rates because of the recession – don't allow high profile government waste to ride up and down King Street every day.

[David Lord \(111\)](#) | User | March 3, 2010 - 6:09 PM

## **Taxes:**

**First Name:** Vic

**Last Name:** Glasberg

**Date:** 3/3/10

**City:** Alexandria

**State:** VA

**Subject:** taxes and budget

### **Comments:**

Dear Mr. Mayor and Members of Council:

I write to urge you to support the City Manager's proposed budget for the next fiscal year, if not to exceed it. As a homeowner and small businessman in the city, I take no delight in seeing my taxes rise. But I take less delight in the deterioration, via underfunding, of the public services on which we all depend. I have always found it bizarre when folks disparage increased taxes needed to fund services they do not use. We're in this together for good or ill, no? In 34 years of living here I have never had to call upon the fire department -- but I happily see the fire department funded with my taxes. My kids have completed 13 years of ACPS, but I would want the schools fully funded. And so forth. Your real challenge, if I may say so, is focusing on the common weal, not your re-electability in the face of threatened taxpayers' retaliation at the polls. You know that many of our public agencies are on the brink. Give 'em a hand, not a push. Your no-increased-taxes critics spend more money on a night out than they are being asked to contribute to the public welfare. You know what the public good requires. Go do it. Thank you.

Vic Glasberg

**First Name:** Steven

**Last Name:** Johnston

**Date:** 2/21/10

**City:** ALEXANDRIA

**State:** VA

**Subject:** City Property Tax Rate

Dear Mayor,

Here is a copy of my email to City Manager Hartmann sent today.

Best regards,

Steven Johnston

Dear Mr. Hartmann,

I just learned that you have proposed a 7 cent increase in the city's property tax rate to close the budget gap.

As a citizen, I call on you to retract this proposal. I understand that there is a budget gap, but completely oppose raising property taxes to close this gap. Rather, you should propose additional service cuts to close the budget gap. Yes, I understand this means reduction in services. That is reality. Stop pinching the citizens and start cutting! We are already suffering from over spending by city government and a bad economy.

Sincerely,

Steven Johnston"

**First Name:** Anthony  
**Last Name:** Esteve  
**Date:** 2/20/10  
**City:** Alexandria  
**State:** Virginia  
**Subject:** Property Tax Rate

Council:

I'm writing today to request that the City maintain the residential property tax rate for FY2011's Budget at 90.3 cents/\$100. At a minimum, any increase in the rate should maintain the total tax amount paid last year. In my view, property owners should not be paying more tax on property that is now worth less.

Regards, Tony Esteve

Why is it that politicians' answers to everything is to RAISE taxes? The city got fat on the housing bubble and the resulting increase in tax revenues due to rising housing prices. Time to trim that fat! The city cannot SPEND or TAX its way to prosperity or a balanced budget. The only way to balance a budget is to STOP SPENDING what you don't have! So, City Manager and Council, I suggest you stop raising our taxes to fit your idea of a budget and then cut the fat off the city expenditures to meet the money you have coming in already. It is what we have to do in our own personal or business budgets. Time you learned how to live within your means.

[Marcus Canzoneri \(106\)](#) | User | February 17, 2010 - 9:34 AM

The City Manager is not only recommending tax increases but additional and higher "fees". He must believe that citizens are so gullible that they will notice that these "fees" are actually taxes.

I understand the need to deal with the waste water problem, for example. But please just do it through taxes and not fees. Then, at least, those of us who itemize on our federal taxes could take a deduction. We can not do this with fees.

[H.J. Rosenbaum, Ph.D. \(72\)](#) | User | February 17, 2010 - 9:01 AM

To be quite frank, I'm tired of having my taxes raised. As a retiree, I do have the option of moving to another city or state with lower taxes.

I would suggest the City does what its citizens do when they lose their income...limit spending to the things necessary to sustain life. We should only be spending money on core government functions that directly affect the health and safety of the residences. Police, Fire, Sewer and Waste removal. All other agencies should have their budgets cut (including salaries) equally. There are a great many unemployed people that would be qualified to fill city positions at half the existing salaries. And yes, I'm sorry, that includes City schools. The concept that spending on schools somehow will affect the future of the City is dubious. How many students will graduate from High School and eventually come back to Alexandria as tax payers? I was willing in the last budget cycle to accept an increase in property taxes for the good of the City, but I'm

not willing this time. When times are tough, we need to cut our spending and I expect the City to do the same with no tax increase.

[Russ Adams \(97\)](#) | User | February 11, 2010 - 5:54 PM

January 25, 2010

To Members of City Council, Mayor, and City Manager:

I have lived in Alexandria for 25 years and paid casual attention to the city's governance and management - until now. Upon hearing of our city's concern over a \$40,000,000 potential deficit, I became curious as to how such a prosperous community could find itself in such straits and decided to do some research.

I studied the city's annual report, the report of the State of Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and from the Securities and Exchange Commission. What I found was an astonishing lack of management, leadership, and governance in our city.

And here is why.

Growth of the population serves as a solid benchmark against which to compare growth in our government. Our population grew 11.6% between 2000 and 2009. How does an 11.6% growth in population manifest itself in growth of services and expenditures? One would assume they would be roughly in line, but not necessarily a direct correlation. After adjusting for inflation, here is what I found:

- Per capita personal income up 17%. Great!
- Total assessed property value up 106%. Great!
- General property tax up 45%. Four times faster than population growth.
- General property tax as percent of city revenue up 54%. Up 6.9 percentage points from 2000. Our city is more dependent on general property tax.
- City payroll up 41%. Up 16% faster than revenues and hogs 68.1% of revenues.
- Average city salary up 36%. Up five times faster than population growth.
- Total city expenditures up 54%. Up five times faster than population growth.
- Expenditures per government employee up 49%. Easy to spend money that 's not yours. Four times the rate of population increase. Is the quality of life in the city four times better than in 2000?

This looks like a pretty dismal record of milking a cash cow rather than conserving resources.

And just what may be the root causes of this?

When looking at the breakdown by general departments, some areas of concentration stand out and point to areas needing thorough investigation by the city administration:

Education spends \$165,700,000, net after income. Is it top heavy with administration? There has been virtually no student growth yet school payroll is up 41.1%.

Public Safety spends \$91,800,000, net after income. Up four times population growth? Are we four times safer than in 2000? Anecdotally I do not notice much difference. This looks like

general overhead to me. Should not have grown four times as fast as the population growth.

General government spends \$77,600,000, net after income. This looks like general overhead to me. Should not have grown four times as fast as the population growth.

And where might be the best areas to look for savings? Payroll stands out. The city has increased payroll at 3.5 times the rate of increase in our population.

If our payroll in proportion to revenue were the same as all Virginia independent cities, the savings to the city would be \$24,000,000.

- If our payroll in proportion to revenue were the same as all Virginia municipalities, the savings to the city would be \$9,500,000.
- If our payroll in proportion to revenue were the same as Fairfax and Arlington counties combined, the savings to the city would be \$85,000,000.
- If our payroll in proportion to revenue were the same as Goldman Sachs, the savings to the city would be \$97,000,000.

It appears that at a minimum no increase in compensation at any level of the government is justified and actually some tough decisions need to be made to get the payroll back in line with a minimum target of no more than 60% of revenues. If there is attrition as a result, so be it. We are in a tough economy with unemployment in Alexandria at 4.6% (U-3) and a projected U-6 rate of almost 8%. That compares to 6.2% and 10.6%, respectively, in the Metropolitan area. There are plenty of qualified people looking for jobs. It is time for the city employees to tighten their belts like the rest of us.

Raising taxes is an unacceptable solution. The job of the city government and leadership is to be faithful stewards of the resources of the city and its citizens. Constant vigilance to prevent the squandering of our resources and reducing costs must always be high on our leadership's agenda.

The city payroll is the largest target and opportunity. Where the rest comes from is a challenge and charge to the city government and leadership from the citizens of Alexandria.

Sincerely,

J.J. Smith

[Joseph Judson Smith, III \(90\)](#) | User | January 29, 2010 - 2:47 PM