

Mail Tribune

Guest Opinion: Ashland City Council should work with, not against citizens

By Mary Cody

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Numerous people have asked me why the city of Ashland budget process seemed arduous and contentious this past May for the 2017-19 biennium. They ask me because I was on the Ashland Citizen Budget Committee at the time. I assure them the budget experience in May was laborious, unique and unnecessary.

Four citizen CBC members including myself participated in the 2015-17 budget process and it went well. What was different? The mayor and city councilors changed the budget process to limit citizen involvement. Citizens on the CBC were denied information, intimidated and insulted. The city simply bypassed citizen involvement in some instances and should be held responsible for the budget that is facing a shortfall. To their credit, occasionally a city councilor would question the process being used.

The state requires that citizens participate in the budget process and do so by asking questions and using their experience to feel confident in approving the budget. The CBC is composed of seven citizens, the mayor and councilors to total 14. Because many citizens on the CBC were new in 2015, meetings were held, but they became contentious when several citizens felt their questions were not being answered. After numerous meetings, the city canceled future meetings, saying it had answered all our questions when it had not. Its refusal to provide information to citizens serving on the CBC, in order to responsibly review and approve the budget, is disturbing, particularly considering it is the serving citizens' duty to ask questions.

In April 2017, without consulting CBC citizens, the mayor scheduled special meetings for councilors only to discuss

proposed projects to be added in the budget, including five additional police officers costing over \$1 million dollars biannually. Citizens serving on the CBC objected. In past years, citizens participated in discussing and approving new projects to the city's budget, including funding options. The city blatantly ignored the citizens on the CBC and councilors alone approved projects, including the hiring of five officers, without identifying a funding source. The city then intended to have the CBC identify funding sources to pay for the officers.

During May 2017 budget hearings, the CBC did not approve property tax increases intended to pay for the officers. Most of the citizens serving on the CBC voted no. Former CBC members also expressed concern over hiring five officers, considering the already swollen budget. However, in June after the budget hearings, the city raised the property tax to fund an officer. It later approved the use of marijuana tax revenue and added a surcharge to our utility statement to fund a second officer. In January 2018 the city decided it didn't need five officers so it approved funding for two of the four officers, resulting in surcharges totaling \$2.50 added to our utility bills. This budget debacle is the creation of the city.

It is important to add that some citizens on the CBC questioned the need for five officers, particularly considering the lack of information and limited funding options. During May budget hearings, citizens asked for information that was denied, such as employee salary details. The Daily Tidings published an editorial, "Public means public" (May16) agreeing with the citizens. Information provided in past budget documents, such as performance measures/matrix, was greatly reduced and citizens were told that information is not for discussion. For example, in the 2015-17 budget, the Police Department offered 23 performance measures, such as adequate staffing on scene to effectively and safely handle incidents. The 2017-19 budget document for this biennium contained only three. This is far less information at a time when the chief was asking for \$1 million to fund five, later four, police officers. For the city, alone, to change

the budget process and circumvent citizen participation, deviating from past practice, in order to achieve its agenda is alarming and undemocratic.

The terms of two CBC citizen members ended Dec. 31, but neither one was reappointed on Jan. 16. I am one of them. I had voted no on raising property taxes and no on approving the budget. From time to time, I hope to write more articles to provide insight into Ashland budget issues.

— Mary Cody of Ashland, a career Certified Public Accountant/ internal auditor, is a former member of the Citizens Budget Committee, the Ashland Municipal Audit Committee and Ashland Parks Performance Audit.