

Cuts We'd Like to See

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In addition to continued support for Durham's billboard ordinance, this month's Interneighborhood Council (INC) listserv is buzzing with discussion of Durham's city budget. North Carolina's state government faces a budget deficit of more than 20% of the total 2009-10 budget, so it is no surprise that the city of Durham is looking toward drastic cuts as well. But far from complaining and begging that certain services and departments be spared, INC members are offering concrete suggestions regarding prioritization and streamlining. Perhaps a brief summary will get the rest of Durham thinking and offering ideas for dealing with this budget crunch that is sure to affect us all.

Among the first suggestions was to lay-off city employees who take their jobs for granted (with an offer to provide a short list, if requested). Industry surely considers layoffs the fastest way to cut costs, and government has long been accused of not using its workforce to full capacity. Furthermore, termination of those performing under par discourages remaining employees from taking their jobs for granted. Many, if not most, of the jobs cut last year were already vacant and were, therefore, eliminated on paper only. In order to truly reduce city jobs, Durham will have to do it in real time, but this would hardly be prudent without complete performance reviews of individual programs.

Most people are loath to insist that anyone lose his/her job. An alternative suggestion was to offer part-time employment and job-sharing, thereby reducing benefit costs like health insurance. Durham has many qualified citizens who cannot work full-time-- because of school and family obligations, for instance.

There's been no dispute that taxes on *prepared* food, hotel occupancy, and entertainment should be considered before any property tax increase. Property taxes particularly harm those with limited incomes, who live on social security benefits or unemployment compensation or who have no higher-paying job prospects. Furthermore, according to Durham citizen Chuck Watts and former city-council candidate Donald Hughes, over 100,000 Durham employees (>60% of Durham's workforce) live in other municipalities. Surely they should help pay for the security and infrastructure that benefits them when they are here.

The suggestion was even made that Durham sell some of its >60 parks, first offering them to neighborhoods or non-profits, thereby reducing overall maintenance costs while perhaps increasing (albeit minimally) the tax base. Though most of my acquaintances would balk, there are areas where this could make sense. Consider, for instance, the long-vacant two-bedroom house adjacent to the Northgate dog park (but separated by Ellerbe Creek). I've often dreamed of owning this cute little lot, myself. Rather than leaving it to deteriorate, why not sell it to a responsible, property-tax-paying owner? Apparently, Forest Hills and Duke Park have city-owned residences as well -- remnants of a time when on-site caretakers maintained the parks, which leads to another suggestion: Would onsite caretakers be a less costly means of park maintenance?

At Durham's Neighborhood Engagement Workshop, citizens stated their desire to actively maintain and improve their neighborhood parks, thereby giving such public areas prompt attention while reducing city labor/maintenance costs. Indeed, many homeowners associations have recreation or grounds committees whose volunteers improve common areas in this manner. Why not the city of Durham? Apparently because government red tape makes it too difficult. INC former president, Bill Anderson, is president of DPPI

(Duke Park Preservation Initiative), a non-profit, grass-roots citizen organization determined to cut that red tape and restore the Duke park bathhouse into a community center.

Suggestions for smaller savings – like forgetting about the fancy graphics yet to be installed on the new garbage trucks – are far from irrelevant. Little things add up, especially in challenging economic times.

This ongoing INC discussion reminds me, once again, of why I live in Durham – it's because of the people who, despite episodes of discouragement or defeat over the years, continue to be active in decisions affecting their greater community. I only wish the many more Durham citizens who 'don't want to get involved,' would consider doing so every now and again– if only to lift the burden from those fellow Durhamites whose dedication and hard work are so often taken for granted.

The city has admirably provided many pathways for citizen involvement in budget discussions, including Coffees with Council (13, 20, 27 Feb and 11, 13, 23 Mar), the Neighborhood Engagement Workshop (27 Feb), two budget public hearings (1 Mar and 7 June), the State of Durham's Economy Breakfast (23 March), and of course direct contact with city officials via phone or email (which I have always found easy). Those who refrain from utilizing these opportunities for input should also refrain from complaining about next year's budget restrictions on the services that benefit them.

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