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Review of Budget decisions and what's next: on the Agenda.


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Coffee wakes

Dear neighbors,

Spring in Michigan this year is a fleeting, day-by-day event. Within a few days we go from heavy rain and temperatures in the 40s to nothing but sun and temperatures in the low 90s. From a good-news perspective, this has to mean that work on our city streets will begin in earnest - it's already underway in many parts of town. From a bad-news perspective, the damage to the infrastructure from all the rain continues to be an issue. Yesterday I spoke with someone who complimented the work the City has completed in the Allen Creek valley, as the heavy rain didn't flood all the streets that it has in the past. I pointed out that Depot and Madison still flooded heavily, that quite a few basements have been damaged by water and wastewater, and that last year the City faced three or four "hundred-year" rains. There's still a lot of work to do.

I fear this makes me one of those who sees the glass half-empty.

It's not that I doubt the value of working on our systems to improve them; it's that I'm not certain how quickly and effectively we can make these improvements. Last year we had several "hundred-year" rainstorms. The weather this summer could be just as interesting, and those infrastructure changes aren't easy or comfortable (and we all complain when re-building the system makes our individual lives more difficult).

(The photo above, taken on Memorial Day, shows kayaks in the playground at Island Park.)

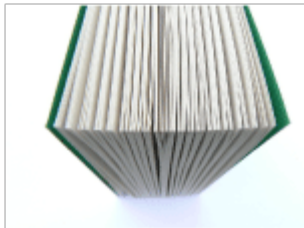
It's been only a week since I sent my last update. I'm sorry to fill your mailbox with City politics. As soon as the Council approved a budget, of course, those other issues that had been postponed became active.

some of us up

I hold office hours 7:30 to 9 am on Mondays at the Northside Grill. If you want to talk, please join me there.

Recently the discussions have been all about the budget, but I'm always hopeful that there's more to this job than the money talk. So if you have an issue or concern, please call or take advantage of these open hours.

The folks at The Northside have decent morning coffee and a friendly, neighborhood atmosphere. If you see me there, please wave, and if you have time, please, join me for coffee and a chat.



What am I reading?

I spend a lot of time reading. I read about other communities, Lansing government, development and planning policy, transportation planning . . .

Here's my current and recent reading list:

Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error, by Kathryn Schulz (this is the correct title, and I really recommend this for policy makers, administrators, or anyone who enjoys thinking

About the budget

The City Council voted, just before midnight on May 31, to approve the City's budget. Only a few amendments passed - one to increase funding for human services to reflect the same reduction other programs and departments face, one to appropriate funds for parks maintenance (to keep a promise made in 2006), one to appropriate the funds for a third primary (two primaries had already been in the budget) and two resolutions that relate to the DDA parking agreement and TIF expenditures. Over the course of the last week, I've fielded several questions about the budget decisions.

Why did Council approve funding for human services, but not approve a resolution to maintain police staffing levels?

Funding for human services - the non-profits that provide shelter, food, and medical care to our community - was not a very contentious issue. Members of Council voiced concern that the funding increase affected the General Fund, but recognized that this allocation was likely to save dollars in other budgets. Human services programs can reduce the cost of police intervention and the burden on the Courts.

The Council did not approve an amendment to appropriate \$110,000 or so from the General Fund reserve to retain four positions in the police department. This proposal - even for the 3 months that the funding covered - was seen as a promise to staff that the City might not be able to keep. At the same time, Council members urged the staff and the City administration to resolve the union contracts by regularizing the staff contributions to benefits. Right now, some union members and all non-union staff contribute toward their benefits; other union contracts remain to negotiate (firefighters, police unions and AFSCME).

Why did the Council decide to approve the parking contract with DDA?

The contract, as presented to Council, was non-negotiable. Council members were told that they either approved the contract as written, or they risked losing the funding from parking revenues. The City's budget was created on the

about the way our minds work).

A variety of white papers on climate change and local government. I believe that these papers provide valuable background information for making long-range public policy decisions.

expectation of the parking revenue funds. Council members were told that, if this contract was not approved as written (with no amendments) the City would face having to lay off more staff - possibly as many as 16 more people.

Although there was a great deal of discussion, the parking agreement passed as presented.

My votes:

I voted to amend the parking agreement. I voted in favor of increasing the funding for human services, parks maintenance, and elections (that third primary). I also voted to reduce the allocations in the Percent for Art program (failed); to extend funding for four police positions (failed); and to eliminate a \$45/month fee for garbage pickup in the downtown (failed). I supported the budget as amended (it was a unanimous vote).

On the Agenda

Ordinances up for a vote:

Medical Marijuana licensing and zoning

The City Council continues to work on medical marijuana licensing and zoning. This week the two ordinances are considered 'at second reading' but they may be amended further. The Council spends about an hour discussing these ordinances and considering amendments at any given meeting. While the process has taken far longer than anticipated, other ordinances (for example, the design review ordinance also on the agenda) have been referred to committee for the type of work Council is doing in the open, and have taken years of constant work to bring a finished ordinance to Council for discussion. Because the City doesn't have an easy model to follow regarding regulating medical marijuana, Council members have worked hard to understand the implications of each decision.

I hope the Council can finish its work this week, with a final vote in about a month. But that's just my hope. If you're interested in these ordinances, here's a link to the agenda with the current versions:

[Licensing](#)

[Zoning](#)

Public hearing and final vote on design review ordinance

The Council will hold a public hearing on a proposed ordinance

to add design review (and a design review board) to the development process for the DDA area. This ordinance was intended to be approved in conjunction with the rezoning of downtown (approved in 2009) but the complexities of the issue required a more in-depth consideration than originally expected.

A public hearing on this ordinance allows for those who support it - and those who may oppose it - to provide insight to Council. If you have questions about how design review would work, here's a [link](#) to the agenda with the background documents.

Ordinances up for approval, with vote at a subsequent meeting:

Water, sewer and stormwater rates

The Council is being asked to consider changing the rates for water, sewer and stormwater services. This is a change in the ordinance, and is at 'first reading'. If approved at first reading, a public hearing should occur in two weeks.

Plant Materials, Screening and Landscape Island Requirements

The Council is also being asked to consider changes to the ordinances outlining landscape requirements for new site plans - primarily, new or renovated commercial areas.

Resolutions

Increase the budget for the municipal center construction & renovation project

The funding for this amendment (just over \$1 million) was allocated in the FY11 General Fund budget. This amendment authorizes payment for improved security systems.

Stadium bridges - MDOT and Ann Arbor railroad

In the ongoing saga of getting the Stadium bridges reconstructed, the City Council will consider two allocations: \$800,000 agreement between MDOT and the City for a right of way - this will allow for reimbursement from federal Tiger grant dollars and \$259,929 for the construction of a permanent pedestrian crossing along the west side of S. State Street at the existing railroad crossing.

Other items

The annual historic preservation awards will be presented at Council.

The staff will present a plan for public engagement regarding the proposal to place on the ballot a renewal for the street millage and a new millage (.25 mills) for sidewalk maintenance.

Art plans - not yet action items

The Public Art Commission has forwarded their 2011 and 2012 plans for public art. These plans should be before Council for discussion and approval in July. Here's a [link](#) to these plans.

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