



## Another tough budget year looms

By Deena Winter

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It's going to be another tough budget year for the city of Lincoln, guaranteed.

Mayor Chris Beutler said Tuesday that the city still has a long way to go in fixing the municipal budget's "structural deficiencies." That will require "many more difficult decisions" this year, he said.

And, he added, "There will be additional job cuts."

During his first time through the budgeting process last year, he learned special interest groups and "the loudest voices" get the most attention at city hall.

But he wants to hear from more average Joes about what they expect from their local government as he begins using outcome-based budgeting, in which decisions about city services are made based on their value to the community.

The approach has been successfully used in other communities to erase budget deficits. Rather than cutting all departments across the board, some less-valued programs or services can be condensed or cut.

The process will help determine what services citizens think are most important, and which they could live without. And how much they're willing to pay for those services.

Beutler selected the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center to lead the public outreach effort. The Public Policy Center has helped other cities with such projects.

The center will conduct a scientific survey of 600 randomly chosen Lincoln residents later this month. Information gathered will be used during "in-depth public discussions" and town hall meetings. All citizens will be invited to weigh in online or in writing.

Alan Tomkins, director of the Public Policy Center, said other cities such as Fort Collins, Colo., and Auburn, Ala., have undertaken similar endeavors, but it's still "cutting edge" for a city to bring the public voice into the budgeting process.

People often feel disconnected from city hall and are “hungry to know what their government is doing and why,” Tomkins said.

Beutler informed the City Council of his plans during an informal Monday meeting.

Not that the council has much say in the matter, but Councilman Jon Camp immediately questioned the need to spend money on such a process — which a mayoral aide estimated would cost roughly \$20,000 to \$25,000.

Camp said the budget is “complicated” and it’s their job, as policymakers, to make budget decisions. He suggested another budget retreat instead.

Councilman Ken Svoboda said he tends to agree with Camp, and questioned whether the results would dictate the administration’s budget decisions.

“I don’t think you should do government by polling and I’m not advocating that at all,” mayoral aide Rick Hoppe said in response.

In the end, however, the council can’t stop the mayor from proceeding. That was clear the next morning when the mayor held a press conference to tell the world of his plans.

### **How much would you pay for better snow removal?**

As one council member said in response to hearing about Beutler’s plan to survey residents, if you surveyed people right now, they’d probably say they want better snow removal.

Survey them in the summer, and they’ll talk about swimming pools.

Regardless of what the survey says, the mayor plans to re-examine how the city handles snow removal.

Beutler said at winter’s end he’ll get a briefing from his public works department on ways to improve snow removal.

In addition to re-evaluating the city’s snow removal management practices, he intends to have a “community conversation” about the issue. The city can change its practices and do more to get snow off the roads, but many of those changes would cost more money.

In other words, if the community wants the Cadillac of snow removal practices, is it willing to pay for it?

### **Council nixes mayor’s plan for match**

The mayor’s plan to get a portion of the \$1 million he promised the city will contribute toward a multimillion-dollar ice skating complex near the Haymarket District is in limbo

now.

The City Council declined Monday night to sell six lots of land near Northwest 52nd Street and West Huntington Avenue because of questions about how the proceeds from the sale will be used. The city expects to get perhaps \$30,000 for each lot, for which it paid \$30 after the property was foreclosed upon in the 1980s.

With money tight at city hall, lots of people have ideas about how to spend the money. In mid-January, Urban Development Director Dave Landis proposed using the money as matching funds he needs for a state grant for a West O Street streetscape project.

But last summer the council expressed its desire to use the proceeds to spruce up the long-neglected Centennial Mall north of the Capitol. However, it's not clear whether the money can legally be used for anything other than a land purchase.

Then Monday morning, the council learned that the mayor wants to use the money for the ice skating project.

"I'm not excited about that," Councilman Jonathan Cook said. "I feel like every week the plan changes."

He also said he doesn't like it when the mayor makes commitments and the council's approval is treated as a foregone conclusion.

In an effort to have more say in how the money is spent, the council voted 5-2 to indefinitely table the legislation.

### **Selling unused city land**

During a January hearing on selling those lots, Councilman Camp asked where the idea of selling the land originated.

The new Urban Development Department head had to point the finger at himself.

"I asked one day, 'What do we own that we're not using?' " Landis said.

The city's budget struggles prompted him to ask the question, and prompted the possible sale of the lots. Selling unneeded land is "one way to squeeze resources in a city full of need," Landis said.

In fact, he's considering creating a Web page of city-owned lots for potential buyers to check out.

### **He said it**

"I'll throw in my 32 cents here." — Councilman Ken Svoboda, before commenting on

whether the City Council should reduce the proposed 5.5 percent LES rate increase to 5 percent, and whether that would equate to much more than a 32-cent break per month to the average homeowner.

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