**Lower OKs budget, 1.9-cent tax rate increase**

Independent members criticize use of MUA funds to pay salaries of four new police officers

The local tax rate for the year 2015 is 55.5 cents per $100 of assessed valuation. A home assessed at $200,000 will cost $555 for every $100,000 of assessed value. The municipal purpose tax will be a 1.9-cent tax rate increase.

Council approved its 2015 budget and along party lines, Lower Township Independent members criticized the use of Municipal Utilities Authority (MUA) funds to pay the salaries of four new police officers expected to be hired this year.

Clark called the budget a “cop out,” and said that sending money to the police department to pay for officers is “wrong.” He said he is supporting the budget because the $1 million, which he called a “low estimate,” is only going to pay for the salaries and benefits of four new police officers.

He also questioned increasing the Police Department from 42 to 46 officers.

Republican Councilmen Erick Stefankiewicz and Deputy Mayor Norris Clark cast “no” votes.

Independent members Mayor Michael Beck and Councilman Ron Gelzunas with David Monzo cast “yes” votes. Beck said dissolving the MUA will “be the ultimate in shared services.” He criticized the hiring of an attorney as township solicitor whose salary will be paid for by the MUA. He said dissolving the MUA will allow the township to keep money for taxpayers.

“Ratepayer money should be kept into the municipality’s account, so that the rates can be kept low and so that we can have monies that can be used for the ultimate service of tax reduction,” Beck said. “We’re funding this budget by taking special police and fire fund monies and it would not be a cop out if we had to replace those offices."

**City bid to change funding formula at LCMR in limbo**

“What we have done is fulfill all the requirements that we had to fulfill before we take the matter into court,” Wichman said. He said Cape May is not the only municipality challenging the regional school-funding formula.

“There are others who are pursuing right now in court,” Wichman said.

The city’s special counsel, Tom Sabbath and Kerri Wright, are waiting to see what decisions come down from the state’s commissioner of education. Wichman said two cases are pending before the Appellate Division that they were “keeping an eye on.” The cases involve North Haledon, which is not likely to be argued until the next term, and Haledon and Prospect Park, which is hoping to overturn a decision by the state Commissioner of Education that would require the city to send additional money to Manchester.

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