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Southampton departments target funding priorities

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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SOUTHAMPTON - Public safety, highway, library, school and other officials are to identify three priorities in their departments in addition to level-funded expense budgets for fiscal 2011.

Finance Committee members and selectmen will jointly meet with division heads next month to start planning the next fiscal budget. The idea is to begin with the town's current \$12.96 million budget and come up with additional incentives for decision makers to keep in mind down the line, according to Diana Schindler, town administrator.

"We're trying the adding approach instead of taking away," Schindler said.

The town is in a better financial position now than it was last year. Last month, the \$13.01 million budget voters approved in June dropped to \$12.96 million due to reductions in regional school and health insurance costs. Additionally, there is \$220,000 available in free cash now as opposed to \$40,000 in free cash last winter.

"Starting at level-funding makes sense" for fiscal 2011, Robert Blanchette, chairman of the Finance Committee, said recently in a joint meeting with selectmen. "I think we're fortunate that we have the budget in fiscal 2010 that we have. It shows that the town is well managed and we're doing the best we can."

Meanwhile, Blanchette said he is concerned about planning for the future using the stabilization fund, which has approximately \$142,000 in capital expenditures and \$10,000 in its general account. Both accounts require a two-thirds vote by Town Meeting voters to be used.

The stabilization money as it stands is enough to last about three years because of its annual commitment to pay \$55,000 for a fire truck and police cruiser, said Finance Committee member John Martin.

"We continue to expend monies from it, but we haven't in recent years put money in it," Blanchette said.

Selectmen this month signed a \$264,000 contract with Central States Fire Apparatus to purchase a pumper tanker for the Fire Department, but they haven't determined a borrowing term yet, Schindler noted.

Meanwhile, Police Chief David Silvernail said he has identified two of his priorities: an estimated \$30,000 police cruiser and a speed trailer worth \$16,000. The speed trailer is an electronic message board that alerts drivers to slow down in school zones, near recreational fields and at accident scenes.

"We get enough requests from the public to deploy the speed trailer that it would warrant us having a second one," Silvernail said. He noted his department spent \$2,000 from its \$667,000 budget recently to repair its only speed trailer. Meanwhile, Silvernail maintains police cruisers should be purchased annually. The cruisers tend to wear out two or three times as much as regular vehicles, Silvernail

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said, because they are driven by multiple drivers with different driving styles and are idle for long periods of time.

"Police cars are driven 24 hours a day 7 days a week - they don't really get a break," Silvernail said. "A lot of members of the public don't take into consideration that extra wear and tear."

Such requests by department leaders will be taken into account when planning target numbers and time lines for the stabilization fund, Blanchette said. Budget requests are due Jan. 13.

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