

Statement of Mayor Noam Bramson
Adoption of the 2011 Budget
December 14, 2010

Our country is still suffering the effects of the worst economic slow-down since the Great Depression, with serious impacts on major municipal revenue sources and simultaneous upward pressure on major municipal costs. In this difficult economic climate, there are no easy or pleasing choices, but there are better and worse choices, and we have a responsibility together to distinguish one from the other.

It has been the City's goal to balance several important interests: (1) respect the financial pressures confronting taxpayers; (2) preserve investment in essential services; and (3) safeguard the longer-term health and stability of our community. These are seemingly straightforward objectives, yet they are often in tension with each other – and now, more than ever, impacted by factors that local government cannot control.

On the whole, I believe that New Rochelle's 2011 budget achieves this balance about as well as circumstances permit. It features a municipal tax rate that is the lowest among the urban centers of Westchester, it averts layoffs and preserves core services, but, nonetheless, reduces our workforce to just about the smallest size in New Rochelle's modern history, it features a fund balance that, while smaller than optimum, is still sufficient to provide some measure of cushion against the unexpected. And while it achieves a handful of goals through borrowing or deferring expenses, it does so in the context of an overall bonded debt level that is the lowest in more than a decade.

That is not to say this budget lacks meaningful sacrifice. Our smaller workforce will impact the speed and scope of service-delivery. Many desirable, but non-essential, programs have been defunded. Our capital investments are only a fraction of what they ought to be – a situation that cannot persist indefinitely without serious consequences. And I suspect that taxpayers are not particularly interested in hearing that New Rochelle's municipal tax rate is lower than White Plains' or Peekskill's – they just know that their taxes are too high and they want relief.

As I said, there are no easy or pleasing choices. Only better and worse ones.

In a sense, our action tonight is anti-climactic. Many of the tough decisions have already been made and acted upon over the past two years through an ongoing process of austerity and efficiency. And many of the other tough decisions were already incorporated into the City Manager's budget proposal. With this in mind, I compliment our entire management team on their seriousness of purpose. There are among the many salaries throughout our organization that have been frozen – all the more reason to be appreciative of their dedication and work product.

The amendments adopted by the Council tonight, although small in context, represent an improvement to the proposed budget. I would like to thank every member of Council for the cooperative spirit through which our agreement was achieved. It is notable that both the amendment package and the budget as a whole are being approved on a unanimous bipartisan basis, the first time in several years that this has occurred. In these difficult times, the people of New Rochelle expect their elected officials to roll up their sleeves and get to work, regardless of party. That is precisely what the Council has done in this case.

Lastly, our fiscal responsibilities do not end with the adoption of a single budget, but require instead a constant attention to the shifting needs, conditions and opportunities within our community. The year ahead may defy expectations, for good or for bad, and we must be ready.

For now, I conclude by once again expressing my thanks to those who applied themselves to this process, including the many citizens who offered constructive suggestions and feedback.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of the moment, New Rochelle retains the strength and vibrancy of a great and growing community, with every reason for confidence in its future.

I vote yes.