

Out in Harrisburg, politicians are out of touch

Commentary



Someday, perhaps by the time the Phillies begin their 2016 season, and hopefully before man lands on Mars, a state budget will be passed.

And oh, what a celebration will commence in the big chamber of the state Capitol. There will be legislators flashing dazzling smiles and clasping hands in unity. We'll hear long-winded speeches of self-congratulation from members of both parties, trumpeting their willingness to reach across the aisle to find common ground. We'll hear they did what's best for the good people of the commonwealth. Gov. Tom Wolf will rejoice. It'll be enough to make you sick.

The state budget, presumably, will be announced with the pomp and circumstance usually reserved for the selection of a new pope. The figurative white smoke from Harrisburg that day will very nearly match the smoke of frustration billowing from the ears of the frustrated people of the commonwealth.

In the meantime, the suffering continues. Friday is Day 142 of Pennsylvania Held Hostage. County governments, many of which are stretched to their economic limit under normal conditions, have not received state funding for some time. Much of the funding was intended for human service providers and other nonprofit agencies, such as those who help people with disabilities, seniors and other at-risk populations.

The fallout has been alarming. A recent United Way of Pennsylvania survey found that 47 organizations statewide reported they've laid off or furloughed staff or reduced hours and/or staff benefits. College students are going without financial aid. The ineffectiveness of our Legislature since July 1 goes on and on.

Meanwhile, we wait for the white smoke.

Bucks County Commissioner Rob Loughery, who gets my vote for person of the week, can't wait any longer. Not another second longer. At a meeting of the commissioners Wednesday, he suggested the county follow the lead of the state Legislature and turn

off the money spigot. He said the tax money and fees the county collects and sends to the state each month — between \$4 million and \$5 million — should stop. Instead, the county will keep the money, presumably in an escrow account, and use it to fund county social service programs hanging by a thread.

Will Bucks County's withholding of state funding be a violation of law? If it is, too bad. When the state fails to deliver a budget almost five months after the end of the previous fiscal year, causing suffering to those who already shoulder more than their share, the state deserves what it's not going to get.

"Last week, Dave Boscola (the county's director of finance and administration) suggested to me we should hold back the money to the state because of the budget delay and because the county's going to go over budget," Loughery said Thursday. "I told him it was a great idea."

If the state plays hardball and demands those withheld funds and fees plus interest, perhaps Loughery and his fellow commissioners should counter by

demanding interest on the state funding that's been delayed. Tit for tat. An eye for an eye. Call it what you will.

"Yeah, we could get in a little trouble, but so what?" said Loughery. "I'd like to see them come and arrest us. But they're not going to do that."

"We're going to meet Monday or Tuesday, the county row offices and all the departments, to decide if we should withhold the money. But from what I'm hearing now, the response from them has been, 'Let's do this.'"

Last week, I listened as Loughery delivered the keynote speech at the Family Service Association of Bucks County's annual luncheon. He said most people do not understand that helping fund social programs is a large part of county governing and the county is responsible for the programs' delivery and effectiveness, and for monitoring the impact of those services on our community. He's right: When the state spigot is turned off, the only thing delivered to those who need it most is pain and worry.

Know who's not feeling the pain? Our legislators. California

legislators are paid \$97,197 per year. Guess which state is second? Bingo! Pennsylvania legislators are paid an average of \$83,400 per year, plus \$159 per diem (day) for expenses. Yes, Gov. Wolf donates his \$187,256 salary to charity, but as a wealthy businessman, he can afford to.

I dropped by the New Britain Baptist Church food larder this week. The place resembled Times Square on New Year's Eve; it was packed to bursting with needy folks emptying food from the shelves. I asked larder coordinator Dottie Rimmer how the lack of state funding due to the budget stalemate has affected the good work she and husband, Byron, do for the underprivileged in that community.

She shook her head in disgust. "Do they really know what they're doing to people like this?" she asked, looking sadly at folks filling bags with groceries they might otherwise go without.

Apparently not. It's enough to make you sick.

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LOWER MAKEFIELD

Township sewer rates could skyrocket over next few years

By CHRIS ENGLISH
STAFF WRITER

The Lower Makefield supervisors have tentatively approved a 10 percent hike in township sewer rates for 2016, and that could be just the beginning.

Township Manager Terry Fedorchak predicted at Wednesday night's board meeting that rates for Lower Makefield's 10,635 residential sewer customers could double over the next several years, and Supervisor Dobby Dobson roughly estimated an increase of about 60 percent.

The reason for the dire predictions is problems at the Morrisville sewage treatment plant where Lower Makefield sends most of its sewage for treatment.

The two main options

being considered are a total renovation of the existing plant at an estimated cost of \$80 million, or constructing an entirely new plant at an estimated cost of \$120 million to \$125 million. Lower Makefield's share of either would likely be slightly more than 40 percent, Fedorchak has said.

Coming up with that much cash would mean borrowing the funds and then generating enough revenue to repay the borrowing through increased rates, township officials said.

The current average annual rate in Lower Makefield is \$420, so a 10 percent increase would mean \$42 more a year for a customer with the average rate, Fedorchak said.

The probable steep rise

in rates that will come over the next few years has been dubbed the "Morrisville tsunami" by the Lower Makefield supervisors, a phrase coined by board member Ron Smith at a recent meeting.

The 10 percent sewer-rate increase was one of several amendments to the 2016 preliminary budget approved by the supervisors at Wednesday's meeting. All will become effective unless further amendments are made before the budget is finalized. The supervisors are scheduled to vote on that at their Dec. 16 meeting.

Also approved was an increase in the amount being spent on resurfacing township roads in 2016, from \$700,000 to \$1 million. "Taking care of the roads

is one of the most important services we provide," said Supervisor Jeff Benedetto. "Doing this sends a message that we're serious about road improvements."

Property tax millage in the fire hydrant fund was increased by .04 mills to boost the amount of money needed to pay for water usage from the hydrants.

Previously, the preliminary budget contained no property tax increase. The slight increase would boost total property tax millage from 15.12 to 15.16, or an increase of \$2 for a resident with a property assessed at the township average of \$41,628.

If it goes through in the final budget, the property tax increase would be the first in Lower Makefield in

eight years.

The supervisors also voted to separate street light assessments and leaf collection fees from property taxes for purposes of discount. The assessment and fee will not longer be lumped in with property taxes when residents pay their taxes during the discount period. By not including the assessment and fee in the amount subject to discount, revenues will be increased, the supervisors said.

Also approved was an increase in the yearly non-resident fees at the township pool complex on Edgewood Road. The non-resident family fee will increase from \$495 to \$525 and the individual non-resident fee from \$250 to \$275.

A non-resident is anyone who doesn't live in Lower Makefield or Yardley. Benedetto said the increases will boost the amount of money available for needed improvements at the pools. They are fair because even the increased rates are less than the non-residents would be paying at private swim clubs in the area, he added.

Benedetto, Dobson, Smith and board Chairwoman Kristin Tyler all voted for the amendments and to re-advertise the preliminary budget to reflect the changes. Supervisor Dan McLaughlin did not attend Wednesday's meeting.

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