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Advocates seek funding for programs

Dire effects of proposed budget cuts noted during annual Taxpayer's Night hearing

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Sun reporters

April 4, 2008

Dozens of advocates for community schools and other youth programs pleaded with city officials last night to maintain funding for their initiatives, arguing that proposed budget cuts would have a devastating effect on Baltimore's children.

Speaking at a public hearing on the \$2.92 billion city budget that was proposed last month by [Mayor Sheila Dixon](#)'s administration, the advocates said the city must increase its budget for youth programs by \$5 million to match the money spent last year.

Nate Tatum, director of the community school initiative at Dallas F. Nicholas Sr. Elementary, said the programs at his school have galvanized the surrounding Barclay neighborhood, where he has lived for 54 years.

Community schools provide additional social services in school buildings for children and their families, making the schools more like community centers.

Tatum said the job-assessment program for adults has "put people back to work in our community." The school also provides after-school activities, including chess and African drumming, he said, and any loss of funding "shuts all that down."

Dixon, City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake, Comptroller Joan M. Pratt and other officials listened to hours of testimony from the standing-room-only crowd at the War Memorial Building.

Baltimore's proposed budget calls for a 2-cent decrease in the property tax rate and nominal increases for the police and fire departments. The city would spend 10.4 percent more than it budgeted in the current fiscal year, much of that increase is based on federal grants.

As they have in past years, advocates for children's programs flooded the hearing, which is known as Taxpayer's Night, and pushed for a more stable funding. The group wants the city to include in its baseline budget what it had spent from surplus money last year.

"The first thing that we need to do is to hold on to what we already have, not lose ground," City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke said.

[George Davis](#), who lives in Northwest Baltimore and recently returned from service in Iraq, said Iraq's children need help, but so do Baltimore's.

"We have a serious situation right here in Baltimore," he said. "To see that the children don't have the same opportunities that I had as a child concerns me deeply."

Among the programs is the Peer-to-Peer Youth Enterprise Fund, which helps employ high school students as advisers to other students. The Success by 6 program offers home visitation to families with young children. Experience Corps places senior citizens in city schools as mentors.

"We see these children come to life," said Myrtle Stanley, 78, who volunteers for Experience Corps at Guilford Elementary/Middle, where she taught for 16 years. "We must keep these people in the schools."

The city budget, which will cover July 1, 2008, through June 30, 2009, will go to the City Council for hearings next month and must be approved in June.

Because of large reassessments in the center of the city this year, Baltimore expects \$52.2 million more in property tax receipts, a 9.9 percent increase that would help offset revenue losses elsewhere, especially in real estate tax receipts.

The budget calls for spending 4.5 percent more from the general fund for the Police Department, mostly for negotiated salary increases but also for a \$662,000 increase for vehicle maintenance and a \$441,000 increase for emergency communications.

Spending on city school operations would increase by one-tenth of 1 percent, to \$204.7 million. The budget includes \$600,000 in new money for the homeless, \$4.2 million for affordable housing and \$2.3 million for summer jobs for youths.

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