

Alderman blames state for increase in Aurora tax levy

 chicagotribune.com/suburbs/aurora-beacon-news/news/ct-abn-aurora-taxes-st-0125-20180124-story.html

Steve Lord

Aurora Ald. Robert O'Connor had a message this week for people upset about the city of Aurora's latest tax levy: Blame the state.

"We all need to have some very significant discussions with our state legislators, candidates for the state legislature, and the candidates for governor," O'Connor said from the City Council floor. "We are in a system that is basically broken, as to the use of property tax. While we have that system, we are locked in as to how it works."

ADVERTISING

O'Connor, the long-time Finance Committee chairman, made his comments in response to citizen comments that have been made to aldermen during City Council meetings in the past several weeks. That continued this week, as George Scowins, a resident of Stonegate Carillon on the East Side, pointed out that his property taxes have increased by about \$3,000, or about 47 percent, since 2011.

Scowins spoke out of frustration in saying that he has tried everything everyone has suggested to bring his taxes down, to little avail. He said he has gotten all the exemptions due him — the Homestead, senior and handicapped exemptions — and looked into applying for a tax freeze. As it happens, he said he would have to make less money, even on a fixed income, to apply for a tax freeze.

"I couldn't afford to live where I live," he said.

He said he even took a part-time job for about 20 months, but federal tax rules actually made that a disadvantage.

Scowins had spoken before at council meetings and asked the city not to pass a higher property tax levy, which it did in late December.

The levy of \$75.9 million, for taxes payable in 2018, is about \$2.9 million, or 3.97 percent, higher than the 2016 levy.

City officials have pointed out that the increase is going to pay for public safety pensions that the city is ordered to pay by the state. The part of the levy the city controls, \$42.3 million in the general fund, was the same as in 2016.

O'Connor said decreasing the city's operations fund to cover the amount it pays toward public pensions "would substantially decrease how we do business in the city of Aurora."

He said that during the recession, in 2008 and 2009, the city did reduce its workforce by more than 100 people. In the 2018 budget, it added back 11 of those workers, most of them police

officers.

Ald. Judd Lofchie, 10th Ward, pointed out that adding those officers increases the city's pension liability.

"It is true the state sets our pensions, but we decide to hire more or not," he said. "We have to live within our means."

Lofchie voted against the tax levy.

Lofchie also recently voted against a \$15 million project to enhance the Aurora Transportation Center. He, as well as several residents, complained about a pedestrian bridge connecting the west side of the Fox River to RiverEdge Park on the east side. The bridge would make the parking lots usable for commuters at the Transportation Center, as well as connect bike trails on both sides of the river.

Lofchie said he was concerned that the cost of the bridge, which went up from about \$3 million to \$4 million already, could increase, sticking the city with paying for the increase.

O'Connor addressed that, too, saying the cost of the bridge "had no effect on the tax rate."

He said the Transportation Center project is being paid for substantially by federal funds, with some kicked in from the Kane County Forest Preserve District.

Most of the funding for the project, more than \$12 million of it, is coming from Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds, which are doled out by the federal government and administered in this area by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

The city's portion is being paid for from the proceeds of a \$5 million general obligation bond the city passed last year. Those bonds are paid out of the bond and interest levy that the city extends every year. That has not changed in years, always at \$4 million.

All of the costs in the Transportation Center project are estimates, because the project has not been bid yet. City officials are looking to bid the project late this month.

"The tax rate did not increase because of the bonds," O'Connor said. "For us to have stopped building the bridge would not have reduced our local taxes at all. We would not have gotten the (federal) money that way."

slord@tribpub.com