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## Old Bridge mayor unveils preliminary budget

Says furloughs, health-benefits cuts may be needed

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The mayor has unveiled a \$55 million preliminary budget while calling on council members to help find more ways to cut spending — including possible furloughs and renegotiated health-care benefits.

"It's not the formal introduction of the budget, just a status of where we are," said Mayor James T. Phillips. "With the new governor, the time frame has been delayed and the budget doesn't have to be introduced and adopted until May. This gives the council plenty of time to look at the budget and make recommendations. What I'm hoping for is that the council finds ways of further reducing the budget."

The spending portion of the budget calls for a \$1.8 million increase over last year, Phillips said.

"That's entirely attributable to the increased cost of health care and pensions," he said.

Health-care costs are up \$1.6 million and the pension contribution is up by \$220,000, he said.

In order to make further cuts in the budget and avoid further job losses, Phillips said approval for furloughs for township employees will be needed.

"I need a little help," the mayor said. "'Civil Service towns and the state can go to furloughs. Because this is not a civil service town, you need the union to agree to it and I have not had any union agree to a furlough situation and I wish that they would. I would prefer that further reductions in the budget be done by furlough and not termination. I am most certain that there will have to be cuts in this budget, but I would just prefer that be done through furlough."

The mayor also is hoping, with the cooperation of the unions, that health-care coverage will be renegotiated.

"Health-care coverage represents a \$10 million expense for our town," he said. "If I can find a way to reduce that, with the cooperation of the unions, it would be in everyone's best interest."

The mayor said he also is working with other municipalities to set up inter-local agreements that might eliminate departments and cut costs. He is hoping the agreements, if reached, will be approved by the council.

Phillips also said he believes the time has come for Old Bridge to look seriously into assimilating the Old Bridge Municipal Utilities Authority into the township government.

"The administrative costs at the Old Bridge Municipal Utilities Authority are astronomical and by making a move of absorbing the MUA into the town, we're going to reduce water bills and lower taxes," he said.

Phillips said the current budget included the elimination late last year of four part-time and 15 full-time employees, 13 through layoffs and six through attrition.

"Those 19 people represent about \$1 million in savings between salaries, health care costs and pensions," he said.

Phillips said the eliminated positions were in code enforcement, the tax assessor and tax collector offices and the parks, road, engineering and planning departments. Two clerical Positions in the police department also were eliminated.

"Just about every department has been affected, except the sworn officers, who are under contract negotiations now," Phillips aid. ""They are going to arbitration and whether that department is down sized or not will depend on how much the arbitrator awards. If the arbitrator awards in excess of what the township has budgeted, the only place to make up the difference is the downsizing of the police department."

The mayor said it's a challenging year.

"A lot of things we thought some day we might have to do, now is the year we have to do it," he said. "It doesn't look like we're going to get any help out of Trenton, so we have to do this ourselves."