

Expansive thinking

Expand library's mission, don't cut back on its funding

We don't agree with Mayor Sal Perillo's idea, but we're not puzzled by it. We figure the notion of cutting back funding for the Ocean City Public Library hit him as soon as he started looking at the budget for the next fiscal year.

Good thing he started budget work a few months early.

As Perillo said in last week's edition of the Ocean City Sentinel, the city faces \$3.7 million in additional expense this year that is mandated - before considering any other spending. That includes \$700,000 that must be put into pensions and \$1.4 million for contracted salary increases. It also means an extra \$450,000 for the library.

Mayor Perillo can thank the last administration - an administration he supported - for the bulk of mandated increases.

We have argued for years, like organizations such as Fairness In Taxes, that spending was escalating too fast in Ocean City. The prior administration was weak at negotiating labor contracts and allowed its spending to balloon. It was able to rely on fast-increasing ratables to offset the need for big tax hikes most of the time.

As everyone knew, but many did not want to believe, the real estate boom had to end sometime. At some point, the city was going to get stuck with its profligate spending and fewer new ratables to pay for it.

That time is here.

With an early start to budgeting, there's more time to worry about how actions (or inactions) of the past will complicate the future.

For what must be a budgetary reason, Mayor Perillo has more than once complained about how much money is dedicated to the Ocean City Library. This is the same library he lauded during his mayoral campaign because of all it means to the community and all the more it can mean.

Library budgets are, by law, based on ratables. Libraries get a set portion. When the reval in the resort skyrocketed the ratables, the library got a huge funding boost.

The mayor said he wants that to stop.

He's wrong. And not just because it would mean going back on his campaign rhetoric.

In part, it inaccurately portrays how much the library gets. The library pays rent to the city. It has been doing that since 1990, when the building housing the library, arts center, historical museum and aquatic and fitness center were constructed. And by law, the library's rent is 16 percent of its budget. When the city sends more money to the library, a big chunk (next year would be about \$74,000) goes right back to the city in rent.

Mayor Perillo needs to think back on one of the hallmarks of his campaign. He talked repeatedly about better use of this city's assets, like the performing arts center at the new high school. He is using that thinking to start his own TV show, using the great TV production facilities at the school.

The Ocean City Public Library is another of this resort's best assets. It has amassed a surplus, but that surplus is for expansion and improvement on its heating and air conditioning.

The best thing for the mayor to do is work with the library and its board and expand the library's mission, not cut its funding.

As outlined in this week's edition of the Ocean City Sentinel, the library board approved a study on the feasibility of providing wireless Internet throughout the city. That is an exciting idea that would benefit taxpayers, business owners, visitors and be a great tool for bragging about the resort. That's the kind of expansive thinking we need.