

Wheaton mayor: Budgeting has never been this difficult

By **Robert Sanchez**

After budget belt-tightening this year, Wheaton's taxing bodies are expecting to face more difficult financial decisions in 2011.

"We need to realize that times have never been tougher," Wheaton Mayor Michael Gresk said during Thursday night's State of the Community forum sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Wheaton.

"Budgeting and balancing expenses and income ... was never easy," Gresk said. "But it (the city) has never seen it this difficult."

Gresk, Wheaton Warrenville Unit District 200 school board President Andy Johnson, and Wheaton Park District board President Ray Morrill couldn't help but mention financial challenges as they talked about the accomplishments of the past year.

Johnson said the recession and fallout from the state's budgetary crisis has had "a dramatic impact" on the school district. Illinois, for example, continues to owe the district roughly \$6.1 million in payments.

"That affects what we can do on a day-to-day basis," he said.

The big concern for Wheaton is that state lawmakers might try to raise money by reducing the share of state income tax revenues that municipalities receive. If adopted, that proposal could cost Wheaton roughly \$1.3 million a year.

Gresk said he worries that some services to residents might be reduced or eliminated to help balance the city's budget.

And while the park district doesn't rely on money from the state, Morrill said: "We are concerned for the future."

In addition to the gloomy budget situation, work has been delayed on the reconstruction of the bridge that carries Wesley Street over the Union Pacific Railroad tracks near downtown Wheaton.

A pedestrian bridge over the tracks was opened last month. But the larger project, which had been on the city's to-do list for years, won't be completed until sometime in the spring.

Gresk said the July labor union strike and the early closing of asphalt manufacturing plants for the season contributed to the delay.

However, work is underway on the park district's renovation of Northside Park, which will help minimize some of the flooding in the area around the 70-acre park near Prairie Avenue and Main Street. The city will begin its portion of the project in the spring.

Meanwhile, Johnson said student achievement in District 200 continues to improve. He said ACT scores at Wheaton Warrenville South and Wheaton North high schools ranked in the top 5 percent statewide. And a number of the district's elementary and middle schools received awards for academic excellence.

In response to an audience member's question, Gresk said commercial redevelopment of the old Hubble Middle School won't happen anytime soon.

Still, he said, it's important to someday put the 22-acre parcel at Naperville and Roosevelt roads on the tax rolls.

"We have so little developable property in the city," Gresk said, "and that is a very, very desirable location.

"It should be sold," he added. "But it's a question of waiting for a proper moment in the real estate market to maximize the value of that property."

In another development related issue, Gresk expressed frustration about the asking price for the former Jewel Food Store in downtown Wheaton.

He called the \$3.25 million asking price for the 19,500-square-foot building "the single biggest impediment to putting a grocery store in downtown."

He said other grocers simply aren't interested in spending that much for the building. "It's not from a lack of trying and effort on the part of the city or city staff."

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