

OMAHA TOGETHER ONE COMMUNITY

## Rally backs Suttle budget

### Tax hike necessary to support essential services, group says

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Saying they "will be watching and will remember," about 40 members of Omaha Together One Community gathered Sunday in Elmwood Park to urge acceptance of Mayor Jim Suttle's budget for 2010.

Suttle vetoed City Council plans last week for voluntary employee furloughs and for cuts in the police cruiser fund. Instead, he proposed an increase in property taxes.

Suttle announced the vetoes a week after the council made a series of changes to his 2010

budget. The council will need five of its seven votes to override the vetoes at Tuesday's council meeting.

The city needs to complete its budget by Sept. 18.

If the mayor's vetoes stand, the city's property tax rate would need to increase by about 1 cent to balance the budget, on top of a 2.4-cent increase already in the budget to help pay city debt. The rate would rise an additional 0.8 cents to make up for revenue that would have been generated by a satellite dish inspection fee that now appears dead.

All told, a homeowner would pay an extra \$42 a year in property taxes for a house valued at \$100,000. Under the current tax levy, the tax on that house is \$434.

Vicar Angela Khabeb of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church said OTOC, which draws much of its support from 28 area churches, sees little choice except to raise taxes if Omaha is to remain a "family-centered" community.

"The taxes we pay are not a punishment," Khabeb said. "They are simply the cost we

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pay to essential services in our daily lives."

Khabeb said a city with deep cuts in libraries, parks and other services risks an increase in crime.

"If kids are in libraries reading books, then they are certainly not out on the streets," she said. "We also do not want to risk the safety of our families by seeing cuts to the Police and Fire Departments."

Several speakers talked about the inequity of a proposal to help balance the budget through voluntary furloughs for city workers. Suttle said he vetoed the voluntary furlough plan because it would be "cumbersome, if not impossible" to implement.

The Rev. Jason Emerson of the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection urged all OTOC members as well as other city residents to telephone their City Council representatives

and ask them not to override Suttle's veto.

"We want to remind them that we will be watching and we will remember," Emerson said. "We do not want them to balance the budget on the backs of the city employees."

Acting Omaha Police Chief Alex Hayes accepted an OTOC invitation to speak at the rally in support of the mayor's plan to add 44 new cruisers to the police force. The City Council had suggested adding 13.

Hayes also said he would be willing to work with a police auditor should the City Council find votes to restore the position.

"The Omaha Police Department is not against (hiring) an auditor," Hayes said. "We have a professional agency that works very well. If anyone wants to come and look at us, it's fine."

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