
MAYOR SEES OUTREACH AS PATHWAY THROUGH FISCAL CHALLENGES

By CLARE HIGGINS



I get no magic wand, no gossamer wings, but for three months each year as winter turns to spring, my job requires me to travel through my community as the Bad News Fairy, delivering updates to city employees and taxpayers alike about the grim fiscal predictions our city faces.

This glamorous work comes with the territory of being mayor of Northampton, a city of 30,000 held in the curve of the Connecticut River in the beautiful western part of our Commonwealth. In general, I am a big fan of “small-d” democracy. As mayor I have always felt that it is my responsibility to keep the voters, and indeed all residents, fully informed about all aspects of their government, including and especially municipal finance. In the course of my ten years in this office I have also discovered that having an informed and engaged citizenry ultimately makes my job easier. This does not mean that I always get what I want or what I think the city needs, but it has introduced me to allies in the community I would have never known I had.

Make no mistake, however: it is no easy task to run a \$70-plus million enterprise with state revenues that have declined and still not returned to fiscal 2002 levels; with a structural budget deficit compounded by the constraints of Proposition 2 1/2; or with fixed-cost increases well beyond the scope of our control, due in no small part to the skyrocketing costs of America's broken health care delivery system.

In each of my five terms as mayor, I have had to make cuts to the city's budget. Eliminating jobs and programs is not the reason why any of us seek to serve in public office. Here in Northampton, we have used every strategy at our command: we have reduced waste, combined functions and offices, found efficiencies in regionalizing services, shifted health insurance providers, reduced services, and increased fees for permits, licenses and fines. And still we have been faced with making painful budget cuts. My strategy through this time has been to saturate the city with as much information as possible, beginning as soon as we get the first glimpse of the governor's proposed local aid numbers and lasting throughout the budget-crafting process.

Face-to-Face Contact

In an effort to reach all stakeholders, I generally begin with in-house conversations through our monthly meeting of Northampton's twenty-eight department heads, followed by setting up meetings in each municipal building where I can share the budget forecast with any city employee who wishes to attend. (Department heads cover their respective offices for the hour or so that employees join me for the presentation.) I also make arrangements to attend the regular faculty meetings at each of Northampton's six public schools and our Agricultural & Vocational High School to present the same information. This can be a time-consuming process. To reach all of our public safety employees, for example, I go to the police station at 7 a.m. on four different days to hit all the shift changes and make similar

Mayor Clare Higgins is in her fifth term as Mayor of Northampton, after serving on the City Council for six years. She is a past president of the Massachusetts Municipal Association.

arrangements at the Fire Department. I bring with me a PowerPoint presentation for those departments equipped to show it on a big screen, and in other locations I bring hard copies of all the slides. I spend more than twenty-five hours just on this outreach, but it is invaluable to be able to share the information in person, unfiltered, and to hear the questions and concerns of our employees—both represented and non-represented—as I begin the process of framing the next year's budget.

Over the years, I have had the support of city councillors in setting up meetings in accessible locations in each of our seven wards, in order to offer the budget presentation to all interested residents at a convenient location. These meetings give me invaluable access to my neighbors, and the chance to hear their concerns directly. At City Council meetings, I present ongoing updates as the fiscal picture changes.

In addition to the ward meetings, I reach out to citizens through my occasional Mayor's E-mail Updates. We currently have almost 1,000 on the e-mail distribution list (about 3.5 percent of the city's population). I also give an annual speech at the city's Rotary Club, and I meet regularly with the leadership of the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce, the Florence Business and Civic Association, and any other civic and business group that invites me to speak.

I am in regular contact with the reporters who cover City Hall for our two local daily newspapers. As the budget draws closer to completion and the fiscal year approaches its end, I will invite both reporters in for a special budget briefing just before the final document is presented to the City Council. I provide them with an embargoed copy of the budget a day before the Council meeting. It is critical that our reporters are also budget-literate and have the opportunity to review and understand the budget document in its entirety. After all, despite my



PAUL SHOUL PHOTO

Northampton Mayor Clare Higgins feels that her accessibility is an asset during difficult fiscal times.

efforts to blanket the city with my presence and my presentation, I know that the majority of people in Northampton will only read about it in the newspaper. It is in their service to spend as much time as I need to with reporters to make sure the stories they write will accurately reflect the final proposal and its implications for the services and programs our neighbors have come to depend upon.

Engaging Online

This year, I have taken an additional step in terms of cyber-communication. We have routinely posted the mayor's budget proposal online when it is presented to the City Council at its regularly televised meeting, usually in late May or early June. But as my colleagues know, fiscal 2010 is shaping up to be a year of unprecedented challenges. The city of Northampton is facing a budget gap of more than \$6 million (almost 10 percent of our fiscal 2009 budget) just to maintain level services. After years of trimming staff and program spending, we are facing drastic and disturbing cuts—to the very core of our services. Such times require us to be open and frank about the difficult choices we will have to make. In order to share this information more widely than ever, I have posted my entire budget presentation on our city Web site, including the Cable Access videotape of my presentation to >>

the City Council Finance Committee (www.northamptonma.gov/fy2010).

Moreover, I have put out a call for ideas from Northampton residents, employees and, indeed, anyone who is passionate about seeing our city continue to grow and succeed. I want to learn their priorities and thoughts about the difficult decisions we face together as a community. I want them to hear each other's priorities and worries. I have posted all of the questions and comments I have received on our Web site as well. I have been impressed not only with the volume, but with the substance of these comments. As it turns out, the city has already implemented many of the cost-saving ideas that people have recommended. This helps boost confidence among residents that we are taking all responsible actions before turning to them to ask for a Proposition 2 1/2 override. It also allows me the opportunity to explain why we are not able to take other cost-saving steps. For example, one resident suggested that the city cease making 401K contributions for fiscal 2010, which allowed me the chance to correct the misconception in the community that the city actually does



PAUL SHOUL PHOTO

Mayor Higgins is often approached by residents in her city's busy downtown.

they hoped to learn, and one responded with, "Why does it take eighteen hours to explain what the city does?" By the end of the nine two-hour sessions, all of them could answer that question for themselves. They were impressed by the knowledge, experience and commitment of the city staffers they met. They were stunned by

"Why are we spending \$50,000 on that?!" Now, not only does she understand why we are making the expenditure, she is able to explain it to her friends and family as well. The participants still may not agree with every expenditure, but what an enormous advance it is when people understand the reasons behind the decisions we in government make on their behalf.

Municipal finance is a complicated thing, understood and appreciated by only the wonkiest of policy nerds. Taking the time and opportunity to share information with city staff and residents about how their local budget actually works is an investment well worth the considerable time and effort it takes. I truly believe our city is better able to face the challenges of fiscal 2010 and beyond because of the community's increased understanding and engagement in the process. I still will get no magic wand to fix our structural deficit, no magic wings to lift us over the recession to prosperity; we will all slog through these challenging months (years?) together. Ultimately, it will not be our tax rate, an override, or any other fiscal variable that will see us through. It will be the sense of respectful community we are building via this process of sharing information, listening to one another's worries, and creating together a vision of the kind of community we want Northampton to be, today and into the future. 🌟

I HAVE PUT OUT A CALL FOR IDEAS FROM NORTHAMPTON RESIDENTS, EMPLOYEES AND, INDEED, ANYONE WHO IS PASSIONATE ABOUT SEEING OUR CITY CONTINUE TO GROW AND SUCCEED.



contribute to 401Ks (we don't), and to let people know that we are legally required to make pension payments. This is not an area we can pull money away from in order to prevent layoffs in the coming year.

Although unplanned, it was serendipitous that this year we launched a new initiative called Northampton Cityschool, a nine-week program in civics education that provided twenty citizens with an in-depth exploration of how exactly the city of Northampton works. Before the program began, we asked participants what

the range of services and programs managed by the city, some of which they didn't know existed. Parents of young children, for example, may not be aware of the elder home renovation program.

Our first graduating students of Cityschool have become municipal ambassadors in their neighborhoods, workplaces and homes. One woman described herself as "that person who would read the newspaper at home, pound my fist on the table and cry out,