

# **CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE BUDGET PROCESS**

## **The Budget Process**

**For a one page summary of the budget process please see the Budget Process Calendar on Page 21.**

Step one of the Budget is actually a year round process in which input provided by the public and elected officials is used to help determine the appropriate level of services and to prioritize any initiatives. Community meetings, surveys and presentations are used to gather information.

The first internal process related to the Budget runs from September through about mid October. Using First Quarter revenue and expenditure results, along with preliminary year-end data from the prior Fiscal Year, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Finance department evaluate the City's financial position and prepare forecasts for the next Fiscal Year. At this same time, City department heads are developing their strategic plans on which spending decisions and staffing level requests will be based.

During the months of October and November, OMB develops a baseline budget known as the Level I (one) Budget. The Level I Budget is built on a modified zero-based budget process. A zero-based budget process is one in which every single dollar of every single line item must be fully justified and documented. Until that is done, the line item remains zeroed out.

For the City, all discretionary personnel budget line items, such as overtime and temporary salaries are zero-based, as are line items such as travel, registrations, consultants and office equipment. However, with line items such as Social Security, healthcare benefit costs, pensions and debt service, in which OMB makes the calculation of cost, no documentation is required by the department and the amounts deemed appropriate by OMB are built into the Level I Budget.

In other limited cases, such as with utilities, office supplies, repairs to equipment and printing, the current year's budget allotment is reduced 20%, and then this reduced figure is put in as the new Level I amount. For those line items, Departments have to justify only the portion of their request that exceeds that 80% given them by OMB. Any request by a department above the Level I amount is considered Level II and must be fully justified and documented.

All materials and instructions necessary for Department Heads to craft their budget requests are given to them during the Budget Kick-off meeting, which is held the first week in December. Part of the material they receive includes the Level I Budget developed by OMB. It should be noted that requests for staffing increases or position upgrades go through an additional extended review process that includes the Human Resources Department and Mayor's Office. The deadline for budget submissions by Departments is the second week in January.

From the third week of January through the first two weeks of March, there are two formal rounds of departmental budget meetings. The first round is with OMB and the second round is with the Mayor's Chief of Staff. As necessary, there are often one or more ad hoc follow-up meetings after the formal hearings have occurred. During this process, OMB and the Mayor's Office review and evaluate requests and make final recommendations as to funding. At the same time, the Capital Budget and Program is reviewed and funding changes are recommended by the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission is a board composed of appointed citizens and City Officials.

After the Proposed Budget has been finalized, the Mayor submits the Budget, revenue projections and tax and fee rates to City Council in the form of the Budget Address and ordinances, usually on the third Thursday in March. At this time a Proposed Budget Book produced by OMB is made available to the public.

The Finance Committee of City Council then holds a series of public hearings with each Department in which funding levels are scrutinized and in-depth question-and-answer sessions are held. The time frame for these hearings is usually the first week of April through the second week of May. The public is invited and encouraged to attend the City Council Finance Committee Budget Hearings that take place during the weeks following the Mayor's Budget Address. Copies of the Proposed Budget Book are made available to the public at all of the budget hearings.

It is also during the time of the hearings that the Wilmington Economic and Financial Advisory Council (WEFAC) meets to certify the City's revenue projections underlying the Budget. WEFAC was created in 1994, and is comprised of ten members appointed by the Mayor. Its membership consists of business, academic, and financial leaders with multifaceted expertise and experience. WEFAC's primary functions are to advise the Mayor on revenue projections and trends, and to provide a sounding board on issues of urban economics. It is important to note that, by law, City Council cannot alter the Mayor's revenue budget projections.

After the Finance Committee has completed its hearings, meetings are held in which City Council and the Administration leadership finalize agreement on the Budget. By the third Thursday in May, City Council votes on the Budget. By law, City Council must approve a balanced Budget by June 1st. For the Budget to be legally balanced, revenues plus an amount of existing prior years' surpluses, if any, must equal operating expenditures plus any existing deficits. Copies of the Approved Budget Book are normally available at the start of the fiscal year through OMB upon request.

### **Amending the Budget**

After the start of the fiscal year, OMB has the authority to transfer budget allocations between accounts that are within the same Fund, Department, and Account Group. Account Groups are Personal Services; Materials, Supplies & Equipment; Debt Service, etc. Any other type of transfer, such as between Funds, Departments or different Account Groups, requires City Council approval by passage (through a simple majority vote) of an amending budget ordinance. The same holds true for any addition or deletion to the budget.

According to City Charter (Sec. 2-301 of the Wilmington City Code) "*The Council may not make any operating appropriations in addition to those included in the annual operating budget ordinance except:*

- a. To meet emergencies which could not be anticipated when the operating budget ordinance was passed;*
- b. To pay the expenses of holding special elections and elections on proposals to amend this Charter;*
- c. To pay the cost of councilmanic investigations and inquiries and the compensation of attorneys retained by the Council as authorized by this Charter."*

City Council must determine and approve the revenues by which an addition to the budget will be funded.

## **Capital Program and Capital Budget**

Prior to the passage of the annual operating budget ordinance, Council must adopt a capital program and a capital budget. The Capital Program is a six-year plan listing projects for the purchase of property, equipment and public improvements that are of a permanent nature. The Capital Budget enacts spending authority for the first year of projects listed in the six year Capital Program. Generally, a capital project is fixed in nature, has a relatively long life expectancy and requires a substantial financial investment. Capital projects traditionally take the form of large-scale physical developments, such as buildings, streets and water mains. However, a wide range of other projects qualify for capital funding consideration, including fire fighting apparatus, street lighting, and computer software. **Please see the Capital Program section of this book for more details starting on page 227.**

The Capital Program is presented by the Mayor with the recommendation of the Planning Commission to City Council for approval. Council may delete projects from the program but may not otherwise amend the Capital Program unless requested through the Mayor and Planning Commission. The majority of the Capital Budget is funded using bond proceeds. Bonds enable the costs of projects with long-term benefits to be spread over many fiscal years. Bonds are usually issued for twenty years and are structured to match the usefulness of projects financed and the fiscal policy of the City.

Due to the planning required and in order to reduce the costs of bond issuance, the City has adopted a procedure of issuing bonds on a biannual basis. Therefore, capital projects are budgeted in only even numbered fiscal years and ordinances regarding the Capital Program and Budget in odd numbered years are normally insignificant and represent more of a formality than a substantive process.

The Capital Improvement Program (CIP) is designed to coordinate the biannual capital budgeting process with the operating budget process. The process includes: a) the establishment of a twelve-month capital project spending review; b) an inventory and needs assessment of existing capital facilities; c) the publication of a procedures manual; d) the creation of workshops to facilitate participation; and e) a combined review period for the CIP and the operating budget.

Public comment on the Capital Program and Budget is obtained during operating budget hearings and meetings of the Planning Commission.

## **Accounting and Budgeting Basis**

The City's budget is prepared using the same basis of accounting methods and procedures utilized to prepare the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report. The City's Comprehensive Annual Financial Statement for FY 2013 was awarded the Certificate of Achievement in financial reporting by the Government Financial Officers Association.

The City's financial statements and budget are prepared to conform to the standards of financial reporting set forth by the Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB) in its various Statements and Interpretations. As such, Funds are utilized to segregate the specific purposes and operations of the various activities of the City.

The City utilizes four major funds: The General, Special, Water/Sewer, and Internal Service funds for both budgeting and accounting purposes (**please see Description of Appropriated Funds on page 26**). Funds can be thought of as being like the subsidiaries of a major conglomerate corporation. Each subsidiary is responsible for its own operational results and strategy, yet is still part of the larger conglomerate corporation when it comes to overall management and financial results.

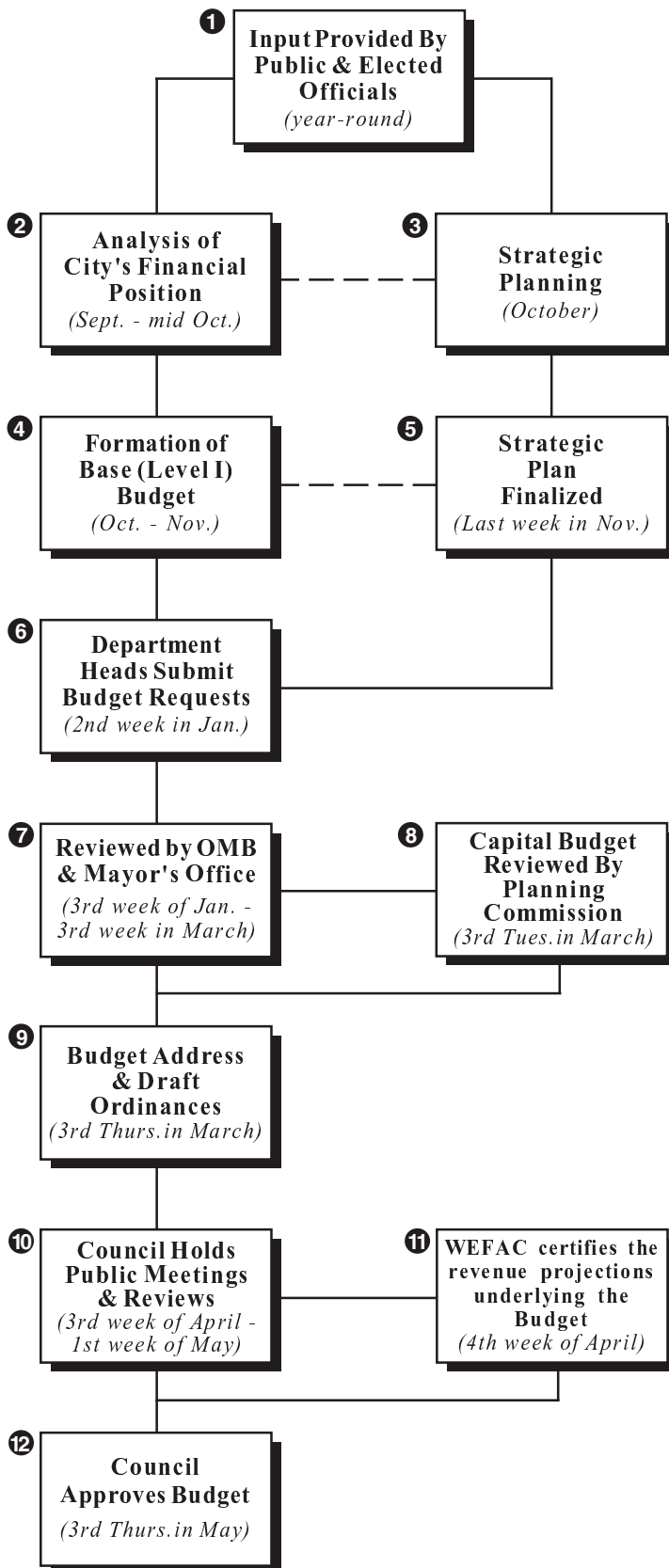
The basis of budgeting for each City fund matches the basis of accounting (the underlying fiscal principles used in the development of the financial statements and for recording financial activity) for that fund. The General, and Special funds are budgeted and operate under a **modified accrual basis** in which revenues are recognized when they become measurable and available as net current assets, and all expenses, except those related to fixed asset acquisition, are recorded when incurred (not when cash is paid out).

The Water/Sewer and Internal Service funds are budgeted and operate under the **accrual method** (used by most businesses) in which all revenues and expenses are recorded when recognized (i.e. when earned for revenues and when incurred for expenses), rather than when cash is collected or paid out.

The major differences between the Modified Accrual Basis and Accrual Basis for both budgeting and accounting in the City's major funds are:

- Depreciation of fixed assets is budgeted and expensed in the Water/Sewer and Internal Service funds. In the General Fund, however, no depreciation is budgeted or expensed, rather the *total cost* of fixed asset acquisitions are budgeted and then expensed when purchased.
- The total cost of fixed asset acquisitions in the Water/Sewer and Internal Service Funds are also budgeted, but only to establish an appropriation line item for spending authority. The fixed asset budgeted amounts and actual purchase amounts are reversed through the use of an equal but negative capitalization account. The fixed asset purchases are then expensed over their useful life through the depreciation account.
- Only interest payments are budgeted and expensed for debt service in the Water/Sewer and Internal Service funds; however, both principal and interest payments are budgeted and expensed in the General Fund.

# BUDGET PROCESS CALENDAR



- 1 Community meetings, surveys, and presentations are used to gather information regarding services and issues.
- 2 The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) evaluates the City's financial position and prepares preliminary forecasts for next fiscal year.
- 3 Department Heads develop five-year strategic plans.
- 4 OMB develops a baseline or Level I budget from historical data, trends, local economy and strategic plans.
- 5 Department Heads finalize Strategic Plan.
- 6 Based on Strategic Plan results and Level I amounts, departments submit budget requests to OMB.
- 7 During departmental meetings, OMB and the Mayor's Office review and evaluate requests, making recommendations as to funding.
- 8 The Planning Commission, a board of appointed citizens (5) and City officials (2), reviews and recommends a Capital Budget and Program to City Council.
- 9 The Mayor submits budget (operating and capital), revenue projections and tax rates for next fiscal year to City Council.
- 10 The Finance Committee of City Council holds public meetings on Mayor's proposed budget for each City Dept.
- 11 The Wilmington Economic and Financial Advisory Council (WEFAC) reviews, analyzes and certifies the revenue projections underlying the Budget. WEFAC consists of regional business, financial, and academic leaders appointed by the Mayor.
- 12 The City Council must approve a balanced budget by June 1 or 30 days prior to start of fiscal year.