



Office of the West Seneca Town Supervisor
Hon. Gary A. Dickson

September 30, 2021

Dear Honorable Town Board Members

It is my pleasure to present to you my Tentative Budget for 2022. For the second year in a row, I am recommending a zero percent increase in the total town tax rate (a combination of the general and highway taxes). This means that the vast majority of taxpayers will see no change in their town taxes. Like last year, this budget is the product of many hours of work on the part of all department heads, the Finance Director, and my office. This budget builds on our success with the 2021 budget and is setting the groundwork for future prosperity in West Seneca.

For the first time I am aware of, West Seneca's budgets are projected five years in the future. I can say with some certainty that, absent unforeseen economic shocks, the residents of West Seneca will not see any large tax increases for the foreseeable future.

I would like to highlight four main areas in this budget: continued scrutiny of staffing, increased investment in equipment and infrastructure, implementation of the town's Policing Reform Plan, and economic development/debt.

1. Staffing

As I said in my 2021 budget transmittal letter, personnel costs are close to three-quarters of our total costs. We cannot fulfill our fiduciary responsibilities to the taxpayers of West Seneca unless we can get a handle on personnel costs. This does not mean we should mindlessly cut positions. What it means is that every position that is funded needs to fulfill an identified need. To this end, I am recommending that we reduce the Highway Department by two laborer positions, increase Buildings and Grounds by one laborer position, and add a Recreation Leader position to the Recreation Department, bringing that department to two full-time positions.

Earlier this year I did a benchmarking exercise to compare the cost of our departments to those in the towns of Cheektowaga, Hamburg, Lancaster, Orchard Park, and Tonawanda. This exercise indicated that, based on cost-per-resident, most of our departments are as cost-effective as departments in those towns. The one exception was the Highway Department. West Seneca's

highway budget is approximately the same as Cheektowaga's, a town with twice the population and 60 percent more roads. We spend more than Tonawanda and Hamburg do, both larger towns with more roads. The root causes of our high costs are unclear, but staffing certainly plays a part. Therefore, I am recommending that the highway department be reduced by two laborers. These cuts will take place through attrition as employees retire – no employee will be laid off. In 2022 I will work with the Highway Superintendent to determine the effect of this cut as well as last year's cuts. If staffing needs to be increased in 2023, I will propose it only if there is solid justification.

In 2020 we reduced staffing in Buildings and Grounds by two positions, from sixteen to fourteen laborers. The General Crew Chief of B&G has made what I believe to be a persuasive argument for returning one of those positions and I have put it in the budget. I will include his justification on the agenda for our October 6th work session.

All of us remember the problems we had with staffing our recreation programs in 2021. The Recreation Supervisor has made a compelling argument as to why she needs a deputy to help run our summer and winter programs. The cost of this position will be partially offset by a reduction in part-time salaries and will relieve some of the pressure to find seasonal workers. Her justification will also be attached to the agenda.

2. Equipment and Infrastructure Investment

Skimping on equipment and road maintenance is a false economy. Old worn-out equipment is expensive to maintain and can put employees at risk. That is why my 2022 budget continues the trend started last year to increase investment in our equipment and infrastructure. In 2021, for the first time in many years, I included funding to purchase 6-7 police vehicles. This will continue in 2022 and for the foreseeable future. I have also included funding for regular replacement of sanitation and highway vehicles as well as playground equipment, most of which is twenty years old. I have also increased funding for road paving and added funding for full-depth street reconstruction projects. Overall, I have allocated five times more funding for road maintenance in 2022 than was spent in 2018 and 2019. Funding was also increased for building maintenance.

3. Policing Reform Plan

In March 2021 our Police Reform and Reinvention Task Force issued its recommendations. We have already implemented one of those recommendations, to contract with a company to provide social worker support for our police officers. My 2022 budget continues that support and implements two more recommendations: body cameras for all police officers and a new captain position to coordinate community policing and other community-based functions.

4. Economic Development and Debt

Economic development has a significant impact on the budget. This year the Total Assessed Value of the town increased by 1.1%, which is a significant increase over the .6% in the previous year. Just over 1% may not seem like a lot, but it adds \$300,000 to our revenue. This went a long way to keeping our tax increase at zero. Not only did that help the town's budget, but it also

helps the school district's budget. I will do everything in my power to maintain a good economic development environment.

West Seneca carries more debt than many of our peers in Erie County. Servicing that debt takes up over ten percent of the town budget. This is more than I think is prudent. This debt comes from two main sources: the Community Center/Library and past highway road projects and equipment purchases. The good news is that debt payments will drop significantly in the period 2026-2032.

The current economic situation in the country has helped me maintain a zero percent tax increase. Due to the rising stock market, contributions to the state retirement systems have gone down. Sales tax and mortgage tax revenue are up, and worker's compensation expenses are down. However, we cannot expect these trends to go on forever; in fact, I am assuming that 2022's revenue from sales and mortgage tax will be less than in 2021. Also, to cushion the impact of future increases in state retirement contributions and worker's compensation costs, I am proposing the creation of reserve funds for those two items.

In closing, as I said last year, I cannot promise that future budgets will always have a zero percent increase, but what I can promise is that there will be no tax increases without a thorough examination of the need and a complete explanation to you and to the public.



Gary A. Dickson
Supervisor, Town of West Seneca