

## TIP SHEET ON BUDGET STORIES

Budget stories don't just happen once a year. Besides the introduction, public hearing and adoption of municipal, school, and other agency annual budgets, there are many other newsworthy opportunities to write about the use or abuse of taxpayers' money.

- 1) Some officials make it hard for citizens (and reporters) to get a copy of the proposed budget. Some municipal clerks have charged \$20 and more for a copy of this public document. State officials say this is wrong. There can be a news story when barriers are put up to make it difficult for the public to see a public agency's budget.
- 2) A program (or person) that got the budget ax - or one saved by popular protests - can make a fascinating feature story. Show what the program means to participants.
- 3) Special education bills, bus contracts, teacher salaries, police salaries, or any budget area showing a large increase, can make interesting grist for an in-depth investigation. What's driving these costs? The difficulty in doing these kinds of stories is the "Says Who?" dilemma. Who says there's a problem with these costs? In these cases, it's up to you, as a public voice, to throw the question up for discussion. Do so by comparing local numbers with comparative districts or communities and statewide cost or pay scales.
- 4) "Music program to be cut if budget is defeated" - School districts often use such emotion-laden tactics to try to gain voter approval of their proposed taxation for next year's budget. Examine such tactics and what supporters and critics have to say about it.
- 5) When voters reject a proposed taxation plan, the municipal council can order the school board to cut a dollar amount. That cut can be appealed by the school board to the state education commissioner. He can then order one of several options. Final budget figures may not be resolved for months. Report the progress of an appeal. There may be some surprising twists and turns along the way.
- 6) Good fiscal management may be boring. But, perhaps it won the town a new Moody's bond rating that will save taxpayers a bundle of money on bond interest payments. What's a bond rating, by the way? Explain to readers how it works.
- 7) Audits have a way of uncovering expensive, embarrassing fiscal boobos. Is the state socking a school district for hundreds of thousands of dollars because of something an audit revealed? How many other districts in the region or statewide may be in the same fix?

8) Major budget issues are often put to the voters to decide. Should the town have a bond sale to build a new library or to buy a new fire truck? Track the course of a referendum campaign and show how residents are involved (sometimes only a small number) in setting a community's fiscal priorities.

9) What ideas do local officials have on how to provide relief to hard-pressed local taxpayers and still pay for public schools? One mayor suggests a national sales tax. A school trustee suggests copying Florida's countywide school system. What do local officials, parents, other taxpayers have to say? Don't be afraid to act as a forum for public brainstorming by officials.

10) Public utilities providing water or waste disposal affect everyone's budget in the region. Take a look at agencies that seldom get public scrutiny. Are agency bigwigs drawing salaries far in excess of the governor's? Do they give out big-bucks, no-bid contracts to engineering, legal, and auditing companies that contribute handsomely to the political party that controls the agency's board of directors?

11) Cooperative services are being promoted as a way for government at all levels to cut costs. Any interesting developments on this in your beat area? Are there any real savings? Provide a litmus-test story for readers showing what real-life is compared to predictions.

12) Governor Whitman and many others contend that New Jersey has too many school districts (and municipalities) and that substantial money would be saved by consolidation. Take a close look at this. Has it been tried? Did it work? Or do most suburbanites prefer to live in small towns with neighborhood schools, while grumbling about their tax bills? And how about parochial schools? How come they are lauded for high quality in education, but also known for operating on a shoestring? Is there a lesson there for the public school system, and the public reader?

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