

## **Preliminary budget boosts taxes \$50**

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middletown

The supervisors will vote on a final budget at their Dec. 22 meeting.

Taxes will go up about \$50 for the owner of the average assessed Middletown property under the preliminary 2010 township budget.

The budget can be examined at the township municipal center, 3 Municipal Way, or on the township Web site at [middletowntwpbucks.org](http://middletowntwpbucks.org). The supervisors are scheduled to vote on making it final at their Dec. 22 meeting.

Property taxes are slated to go up 1.73 mills: 1.62 mills in the debt service fund to help repay bonds; 0.1 mills in the street lighting fund; and 0.01 mills in the fire hydrant fund. That's about \$50 for a resident with a property assessed at the township average of \$29,012.

In addition, \$1.7 million will be transferred from the investment fund into the general fund to handle expenses there. The investment fund is made up of the \$40 million that Middletown received from the sale of its water and sewer systems several years ago, plus accumulated interest. The transfer will leave the investment fund at about \$42 million, said township finance director Dennis Penko.

Township Manager Ray Stepnoski said he worked many hours to make the tax increase as low as possible while still maintaining basic services.

There are no staff increases in the preliminary budget, but health insurance premiums for employees will go up at least 12 percent and contractual pay increases for union employees - which is almost all of the township work force - average about 4 percent, Stepnoski said.

Much of the budget talk at recent meetings has concerned possible staff increases in the police department. Acting Public Safety Director Patrick McGinty said he'd like to bring the number of sworn officers up to 62 from the current 52.

Of the 52, only 47 are on active duty, McGinty said. Two officers are on military duty and three are out on disability or sick leave, though the two on military duty are expected back soon, he said.

"We're safe as it is, but I just feel 62 is the proper staffing for a township of this size," said McGinty.

Middletown had 54 officers last year, but lost two when Chris Jones was killed in a car accident and Chief Frank McKenna retired.

The supervisors can vote to add new officers at the Dec. 22 meeting, but Stepnoski has advised them that each new officer would mean another 0.2 of a mill in taxes, or roughly \$6 for the average property owner.

Some have suggested hiring part-time officers, who would be less expensive but could bulk up staffing. Stepnoski said that's an option that probably should be explored, but he and Supervisor George Leonhauser, a former township detective, questioned whether part-timers would be as good or as committed as full-time officers.

"Part-timers are out there looking for full-time jobs," Leonhauser said.

The per-household trash collection fee will remain at \$364 next year, under a new five-year contract with Waste Management that was approved by the supervisors at the Nov. 24 meeting. There could be slight increases starting in 2011, but Stepnoski said he couldn't provide details because he doesn't know how much those increases might be offset by recycling grants or other revenue.

The big projects slated for next year are \$1.5 million for renovations to the township community center and \$1.3 million for improvements to Beechwood Park. Both projects are being funded by a \$10 million bond issue passed in 2008.

Other big purchases include: \$40,000 for new bulletproof vests for the police; \$80,000 for new police vehicles; and \$74,000 for a new tractor and pickup truck for the public works department.

If the proposed budget is approved with no changes, total township property taxes would increase to 17.57 mills, or \$510 for the average property owner.

Chris English can be reached at 215-949-4193 or [cenglish@phillyBurbs.com](mailto:cenglish@phillyBurbs.com).

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