

Employees expected to lose jobs

by JESSICA L. FINCH
Associate Editor

If the Town Board does not vote for a restoration of funds to the Town of Amherst Planning Department for 2007, then five people will be unemployed as of the first of the year.

In what appears to be the sole case of layoffs in the town's proposed budget, the Planning Department personnel will be reduced from 14 to nine, and with those cuts, many services and programs will disappear, Planning Director Rick Gillert said.

At Monday's Town Board meeting, council members restored one position that had been marked for elimination. The senior planner in community development, a federally funded position, was restored.

Gillert's \$779,547 request for 2007 was not close to being fully funded, with \$395,460 indicated in Supervisor Satish Mohan's tentative budget. The personnel costs were reduced from \$575,791 to \$286,754 in 2006.

The planning director said if he has to work with the current amount of funding then residents can expect to see a number of projects not get done.

"We will become a development review department," Gillert said, adding that the staff will only be able to review site plan proposals for current regulations.

A 60-point document explains programs that will be removed from the town because of staffing.

Gillert estimates it will take his

department 60 to 90 days to review a site plan proposal, which with the existing staff took 30 days.

With a third of the projects being reviewed each year, development will be affected and could cost the taxpayers more in taxes because revenue from permits will be lost, and the commercial tax base won't be growing.

With development such a hot topic in the Town of Amherst, the Planning Department plays a key role in many of the programs for changing zoning codes, preserving farm land, handling the deer population and ensuring that developers follow the requirements.

"The town will see a decrease in the quality of development. We will not be able to do the reviews necessary to keep quality up," he said.

The Planning Department received a lot of support during Monday's budget public hearing. Catharine Weiss, Planning Board chairman, said without a fully staffed Planning Department there would be significant impacts.

"We rely on the staff to give us information. This is one of the busiest (developing areas) in New York, and we need their expertise," she said, adding that the current employees have an intimate understanding of the town's history and future plans.

"(Get) the necessary funds to keep the planning staff at the current level," Weiss told the Town Board.

David Brody, a town resident

and attorney involved in the development of the Town's Comprehensive Plan, said the proposed cuts to the Planning Department will eliminate the ability to continue to review that plan.

"It would take many years to build back to the level of competency before these cuts," he said.

Gillert said the Planning Department will not be able to review additional parcels for zoning, park and tree planning will be eliminated and the Farmland Protection Program, which has preserved 650 acres, will not be continued.

Also being removed would be the administration of HOME- and Federal Home Loan Bank-funded first-time home-buyer assistance programs, which help about 40 home buyers a year.

According to a review of planning departments across the country, the Town of Amherst has 173 annual development review cases with more required functions than many of the towns and cities reviewed. The town also has 1.2 planning staff members per 10,000 residents, less than most towns and cities.



HISTORY DAMAGED — A tree, estimated at 150-years-old, was severely damaged on Kings Trail during the Oct. 12-13 snow storm. Cleanup of the large branches has begun but they still remain on the owner's property.

Photo by Joe Eberle

Veterans Day ceremony set at Weinberg Campus

Weinberg Campus will salute all veterans with an indoor parade, presentation of colors and recognition ceremony on Friday, Nov. 10 at the campus, 2700 N. Forest Road, Getzville.

The presentation of colors, led by American Legion George Lamm Post 622, and indoor parade will be at 1 p.m. in the main lobby, with the veteran recognition at 1:30 p.m. in the Meadows dining room and the presentation on a new benefit at 2:15 p.m. in the Meadows second floor lounge.

Tracy Kinn, state veteran counselor from the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, will provide information on a benefit available to veterans called "Aid & Attendance."

This is an income-based program that can help fund home health care or care in some assisted living facilities to veterans and their spouses who need assistance with activities of daily living.

All veterans are invited to attend and bring photos from their years in the service to share on Weinberg's memory board.

For more information, call 639-3330.

Sweeps taking place in town, village

Sweep number two of the three-step cleanup effort in the Town of Amherst began this week.

Residents who still have debris in their yards must place it at the curb in the town's right-of-way, insuring that it is not blocking the roadway nor fire hydrants.

Also taking place during phase two is the removal of hanging or leaning branches which are considered a hazard. That is part of the approximately \$20 million contract with DRC Emergency Services.

This step, reimbursed by FEMA, is not considered a pruning action but instead a safety measure. Eventually the town, through Erie County, will have an arborist assess the damaged trees on town roads to determine if any need to be removed.

At Monday's work session, Supervisor Satish Mohan reiterated that the town cannot go down the 91 private streets in Amherst to clear brush. Residents and businesses on those streets must place the debris on a public town road where it can be picked up.

Council Member Shelly Schratz sponsored a resolution to request FEMA to allow the town

"right of entry" onto those roads to do cleanup and be reimbursed. The paperwork was set to be filed on Tuesday.

Residents who have questions can call the Highway Department at 631-5990.

In the Village of Williamsville, leaf pickup will take place during one sweep. The Department of Public Works has started the sweep on the south side of the village beginning at South Union Road and will continue to the north side. Leaf pickup will continue weather permitting.

Crew Chief Michael Parker asked residents to separate their leaves from large tree debris, and he encouraged people to bag them.

Anyone who misses the sweep can still bag leaves for pickup.

The Village of Williamsville has teamed with Erie County Cooperative Director Sharon Webber to present a seminar from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 11 at the Williamsville Meeting House, 5658 Main St., on the assessment and repair of storm-damaged trees.

For more information, call Village Hall at 632-4120, ext. 3006.

Also the parking ban that has been in effect since the Oct. 12-13 storm has been lifted.

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