

MIDDLETOWN

Approved budget includes pay raise

A raise for the township manager wasn't part of the final budget but will be considered next year, the supervisors said.

By CHRIS ENGLISH COURIER TIMES

Middletown's final 2008 budget, which was approved Tuesday night, includes a \$10,000 raise for Parks and Recreation Director Debby Lamanna but no raise for township Manager Richard Gestrich.

Lamanna's annual salary increases from \$55,955 this year to \$65,955 in 2008, while Gestrich remains at \$117,300 — at least for now.

The final budget has a property tax increase of 1.5 mills, or \$43.50 for a resident with a property assessed at the township average of \$29,012. It was approved 3-2 with supervisors Lisa Pflaumer, Robert McMonagle and Chuck Thompson voting yes and John J. Kelly III and Jasper Caro voting no.

Gestrich declined to comment on his lack of a raise other than to say he was told it would be decided in July.

"[The supervisors] have to do a performance evaluation, and they haven't done one," he said.

McMonagle said he believes Gestrich is doing a good job and the salary issue was probably an oversight.

"We didn't discuss it at all, so I'm sure it was something that was just overlooked and we'll correct it in the new year as soon as possible," he said.

Kelly and Caro also said the matter of Gestrich's salary for next year wasn't discussed, even in executive sessions. Kelly declined to comment further, while Caro added he had no problem with Gestrich.

"I don't have anything against the work he's doing," Caro said. "He seems very competent, and I think we'll bring this up in the near future and see how everyone stands on it."

Even though Thompson was just appointed to the board at Tuesday's meeting, he said he felt comfortable voting on the budget because he sat through three budget workshop meetings prior to Tuesday and felt fairly well versed. However, he said, he wasn't aware a raise for Gestrich wasn't part of the final budget and would have to look into the matter further.

Pflaumer, the board chairwoman, declined to comment on Gestrich's performance, other than to say he would remain the manager and that there is room for improvement in the communication between the board and Gestrich, and between Gestrich and his staff.

Gestrich will be evaluated by the supervisors and could receive a raise sometime next year, Pflaumer said.

"He will continue as township manager and we, as a board, will improve our communication so we can continue to deliver excellent services and programs to our constituents," she said. "We're here as a team to work with each other and we'll find a better way to do that in the new year."

Gestrich has been the township manager in Middletown for two years, after serving a year as manager at a township in Florida. Before that, he was Upper Makefield's township manager for 20 years.

Kelly and Caro said one of the reasons they voted against the budget was Lamanna's raise. One employee shouldn't get that big an increase in one year without having been promoted, Kelly said.

However, McMonagle, Pflaumer and Thompson all said the raise was warranted based on Lamanna's performance and to bring her more in line with the township's top administrators. For example, Assistant Manager Frank Farry's base annual salary will be \$74,587 next year. Other base salaries next year include \$73,393 for Finance Director Betsy Reukauf, \$74,643 for

Director of Licenses and Inspections Jim Peet and \$67,518 for Public Works Director Rick Wendel.

"To bring Debby closer to that baseline of salaries was only just," Pflaumer said. "Putting that aside, she is one of the hardest working employees in the township. She has greatly increased recreation programs and built an incredible and stellar parks and recreation department."

Still, a \$10,000 salary hike in one year was out of line, considering the tax increase, Caro said.

"I was willing to increase her salary but would have preferred doing it in increments rather than one big jump," he said.

The Courier Times was unsuccessful in its attempts to reach Lamanna for comment.

A proposed new position of director of community and economic development was dropped but might be revisited sometime next year, Pflaumer said.

The 2008 budget of \$37.4 million is 6 percent less than this year's \$39.82 million budget because the township is spending less on capital projects, including major road improvements, officials said.

Some of the reasons for the tax increase are rising salaries and benefits, increased maintenance expenses, increased allocations to volunteer fire companies to replace equipment and more money for the Penn-del-Middletown Emergency Squad, township officials said.

Township police will get a 4.5 percent raise next year under a tentative contract agreement, said Gestrich. Public works employees will get a 3.25 raise under their contract and non-union employees will get 3.5 raises and be eligible for additional merit raises of up to 1 percent later next year, he said. The merit raise will depend on evaluations from supervisors, Gestrich said. Chris English can be reached at 215-949-4193 or cenglish@phillyBurbs.com.