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Chip Johnson On the East Bay

Oakland council must step up and face hard cuts

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An Oakland City Council member told me the other day that no one wants to be associated with the nasty business of staff and service cuts - or take responsibility for the loss of 200 Oakland police officers.

I have some bad news for all of you Oakland elected officials: Not only did you sign up for this detail, the public already blames you.

They blame you for high crime and low school achievement, even though public education is a state responsibility. They blame you, at least a little bit, for the state of public finances and for failing to keep Mayor Ron Dellums engaged, even though the public elected him. They blame you for the pending departure of the Oakland Athletics, and for the return of the Oakland Raiders.

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So if it's concern about taking the blame for deep cuts to close a \$42 million budget gap, you need to go ahead and get on with it.

C'mon. The council has already threatened to remove nearly 200 cops - that's 25 percent of the police force - from some of the meanest streets in the nation unless residents approve a \$20.6 million parcel tax by a two-thirds margin. What could be scarier than that?

Do they believe that announcing a library or park closure will be the tipping point? Will making an announcement to contract city landscaping duties send Oakland residents into a mad panic?

Here's a clue.

When I use an ATM in Oakland or any big city late at night, I am not checking out my surroundings thinkin', "Man, I sure hope there's a public library branch or a park open around here."

About the only thing Oakland residents have yet to see consistently is a council that speaks with a unified voice toward a common goal.

In the absence of even the scent of leadership from the mayor's office, it is left to the council to put aside whatever differences exist among the members to consider the best options and outcomes for the majority of Oakland's residents.

To be fair, the council was given precious little in the way of guidance from the budget document submitted by the mayor's office.

Dellums' instructions were pretty basic: Trim a few jobs here and there, don't touch his own bloated office staff, and pass the remaining budget overruns on to citizens in the form of a parcel tax.

He has not made another budget suggestion since he submitted the document earlier this spring, and I thank him for it.

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Meanwhile, at least two of Dellums' colleagues on the council are working on plans that will be put on the table for consideration when the council meets at the end of the month.

District 5 Councilman Ignacio De La Fuente last week distributed his budget plan in an e-mail sent to more than 3,000 people, including residents and community and business organizations.

Council President Jane Brunner confirmed that she too was working on a budget remedy she will unveil at the next meeting. Both of them are expected to hold informal talks along with Councilwomen Pat Kernighan of District 2 and Jean Quan of District 4.

So far, only De La Fuente's plan is available for public viewing.

He proposes the sale of the city's three golf courses to raise \$30 million among a list of remedies. He supports civilian layoffs within the Oakland Police Department before cutting sworn officers and urges the city to sell the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center for about \$11 million.

De La Fuente called on the city's union-represented police officers to make a voluntary 9 percent contribution to their retirement plans and called for a new two-tiered retirement system for the city's police and fire departments to save the city money.

The proposed changes, which do not include the projected revenue savings from a new retirement system, would total approximately \$50 million in savings.

Chip Johnson's column appears in the Chronicle on Tuesday and Friday. E-mail him at chjohnson@sfchronicle.com.

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