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City manager talks budget, neighborhood concerns at NECA meeting

By C. MAX BACHMANN The Winchester Star
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John Piper

City Manager John Piper highlighted Winchester's upcoming fiscal year budget and answered a wide range of neighborhood questions Thursday evening during a meeting of the North End Citizens Association.

Speaking to residents at the Douglas School on North Kent Street, Piper said the fiscal year 2027 budget maintains city services and invests in key areas without increasing taxes on residents.

"One of the key outcomes in this year's budget is that City Council adopted a budget that maintains services and makes targeted investments without increasing the local tax burden," Piper said. "If you look around at what's going on regionally, that's a significant accomplishment."

Winchester's new budget begins on July 1 and runs through June 30 of next year.

Piper highlighted a number of budget points, noting that City Council kept the real estate tax rate at 79.5 cents per \$100 of assessed value and did not increase the meals tax. He said the budget adds just one new position citywide — a police officer — while also providing a 4% pay adjustment for city employees "to help us remain competitive."

Piper, who took office in January, said two full-time positions in the city manager's office were eliminated, saving roughly \$277,000 in salary and benefits.

"One of the principles that I've tried to emphasize working with council is, before we ask taxpayers for more, we should first look internally for efficiencies and opportunities to better utilize the existing resources we have," he said.

Piper pointed to investments in public safety and education, including a \$1.3 million increase in funding for Winchester Public Schools, although that was just short of the schools' requested amount of nearly \$40 million. He also said most of the city's public safety and emergency services positions are now fully or nearly fully staffed.

"I'm especially happy to report that for the first time in a while, our police department, fire department and soon to be our dispatch are either staffed fully or nearly staffed fully, and that's a huge accomplishment in this environment, in this region and across the state," Piper said.

Following the presentation, residents and local leaders had a chance to directly address Piper.

Winchester Sheriff William Sales praised Piper and city officials for adopting the budget while also advocating for additional funding for youth-focused community outreach efforts, like the North End summer kickoff earlier this month that featured a basketball game played between local kids and law enforcement.

"Are we going to continue to do this?" Sales asked. "Because I've been told before to limit what I do, because of community hours and budget restraints."

Piper said the city had to make "tough decisions" with regards to the budget but indicated there could be opportunities to revisit unfunded initiatives if revenues exceed projections during the fiscal year.

"It really came down to, not judging what was important or not, but just a matter of what we could do with limited bandwidth," he said. "There may be opportunities to go back and grab things that we weren't able to do to start FY27 and maybe implement those things mid-year."

Several residents raised concerns about removing neighborhood blight. Longtime North End resident Mike Jenkins asked Piper whether the city is doing enough to address long-term property maintenance issues.

"I have a lot of pride in the North End," Jenkins said. "After a year of complaints, meetings, documentation and neighborhood walks, what enforcement actions have actually changed resident behavior?"

Piper acknowledged residents' frustrations, but explained that state law and local ordinances require a lengthy process involving notices, waiting periods and, in some cases, court action before violations can be resolved.

"We have a lot of open cases in the city... I mean hundreds and hundreds," Piper said. "The frustrating part of this is... the city can enforce things, but we have to abide by what is in the zoning court ordinances, and they can be quite a tedious process."

Residents also asked about parking issues, stormwater retention ponds and loose chickens. Piper said city staff would follow up on several of the concerns raised during the meeting and encouraged residents to continue reporting issues through the appropriate channels.

Near the conclusion of the question period, Sales asked Piper whether he planned to remain in Winchester long-term, citing frequent turnover in the city manager's office over the years.

"I've been in the city for 25 years, and it just seems like it's like clockwork every five, six years," Sales said.

Piper, who arrived in 2017 to serve as the city's police chief, said Winchester has become home for him and his family.

"This will be my last job before I retire, and I plan on being here until that time," Piper said.

Following Piper's presentation and question-and-answer session, NECA President Karen Burrough and other association members discussed several neighborhood initiatives and organizational matters.

Other agenda items discussed by NECA included:

- Plans to organize volunteers to help elderly and disabled residents move large items to the curb ahead of the city's upcoming bulk-item pickup program.
- Updates from the neighborhood watch program, including concerns about abandoned vehicles, blighted properties and community outreach efforts.
- Efforts to recruit additional volunteers, including a treasurer needed as the organization pursues nonprofit status.
- Discussion of a new NECA logo, banner and branding that would incorporate the Douglas School and the school's historic blue-and-white colors.

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