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Budget should reflect council's prudent priorities

By Dave Gossett
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On Friday, Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon will deliver his proposed 2008 county budget to the County Council, as is his responsibility under the county charter. It will be the public's and the council's first opportunity to see the plan.

All we know now is that it will be a balanced budget because, of course, it has to be. That's the law. In the century and a half since Snohomish County was founded, every budget in every year has been balanced.

As the branch of county government responsible for establishing policy and adopting budgets, the County Council began early this year to identify its priorities for 2008 and subsequently communicated those priorities to the county executive.

When the County Council receives the budget, we will of necessity review it carefully. More importantly, we will be expecting to see that the proposed budget accurately reflects our established policies. We will be holding public hearings to receive the public's response to these budget policies and priorities.

In preparing for next year's budget, the council focused particularly on setting the parameters for the use of new revenues in keeping with the council's well-established practice of cautious, responsible budgeting. It is an obligation that, as the elected representatives of the people, we take seriously.

Snohomish County can expect to receive \$3 to \$4 million in new revenues in 2008 without any tax increases. By 2009, these revenues may add up to \$7 to \$7.5 million. Prudence and

common sense suggest these new funds be used for one-time expenditures that do not require ongoing funding and serve the interests of all county residents.

In allocating the new funds, the council directed the executive to apply the following priorities:

1. Prevent reductions in essential services;
2. Employ responsible debt management, and;
3. Allocate the remainder to traffic improvements, park enhancements, and public safety projects.

Preserving essential county services is the council's first priority because people rightfully expect that the important government services they depend on and their taxes pay for will be there when they are needed. From law enforcement through land-use protections to elections, these services are the foundation of good government.

Paying the debt service on government loans is a critical public policy. Last year, it was the county executive's recommendation to roll over a \$1.5 million interest payment on a property purchase.

In terms we can all understand, rolling over the debt service means borrowing money to pay the interest on a loan. Coming on the heels of the current home-loan crisis, another interest-payment rollover is not acceptable. What is common sense for the family budget is equally good for government, where it is the taxpayers who ultimately foot the bill.

Finally, any remaining dollars will be divided equally between traffic improvements and park projects. We can also start building a reserve to implement the recommendations that will flow from the work of the County Council's Blue Ribbon Commission on Criminal Justice Priorities.

The council is confident the executive's budget will reflect these prudent priorities because that's the way our government works – the legislative branch establishes and funds the county's policies and executive branch implements those policies. When the County Council completes

its review, Snohomish County's 2008 budget will once again be balanced and will reflect the priorities established by the council.

Dave Gossett is chairman of the Snohomish County Council
