

## Local View: Five steps to an acceptable budget

*By Curt Donaldson*

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The Lincoln city budget cannot be quibbled back to health.

I have read letters and op-ed pieces critical of the mayor's efforts to survey opinion and involve citizens in the budget rationing process. Eighteen-hundred people took an online survey with sample budget and taxing options, and there was a one-day workshop for about 150 self-selected volunteers.

The main point of the letters was that this was not a scientific random process. After consideration, a majority of those participating often chose to support a property tax increase to maintain services. How could this be a fair reflection of the general public?

I took the survey and attended the workshop at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus. Here is my slant: I believe the mayor has made an honest and useful effort to inform and engage citizens in the rationing process for our city services, whether and where to make cuts, and where to raise more money.

In the survey and the workshop, we considered examples of cuts and choices, including snow removal, child safety, closing libraries, cutting back recreation center programs and eliminating police accident reports for noninjury auto accidents. (That was a personal least favorite of mine.)

At the end of the sessions, when I listened to the report of each small group, I carefully noted the responses on a grid approximating Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' 5 Stages of Grief.

The idea of a tax increase is very much like the contemplation of death. There was much Denial: "Surely there is waste, and more efficiencies, some fund balances to tap." There wasn't actually a lot of outright Anger, perhaps a bit of muttering about city salaries and the two-for-one retirement match.

There was Bargaining: "We can really pretty much keep up services — just close Bennet Martin Library and reduce hours a bit everywhere else. And maybe just plow one lane on residential streets, and what about snowplows on garbage trucks?" (My favorite new idea of the day.) There was Depression, unspoken. (That would be me.)

And finally, for a surprising number of those present, there was Acceptance, that many of the services were worth continuing, and raising property taxes would be the least-worst choice.

The increases were computed at several dollars a month per house. This has been criticized as an effort to trivialize the cost. I took it rather as a way to bring the cost literally home to the individual taxpayer and family budget.

I do have one criticism: Sugarcoating, or minimizing, the budget gap. In this preview, about \$1 million in cuts or tax increases was on the table. The actual budget shortfall may be closer to \$5 million or \$6 million.

Past and potential budget cuts force us to think hard about what is the use of government and how we pay for it. In good times and bad, government is the major

way we do things together as a community that we could not do as well separately or at all.

Whatever services we decide upon to provide for the common good are always on the artificial life-support we call taxes; certain as death, but less popular. And the need for those taxes is always subject to denial, anger, much bargaining and, less often, acceptance.

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