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From the Director's Desk ...

While members of the Indiana General Assembly take a brief break before moving forward with a special session in order to meet their constitutional duty of providing a state budget, local officials may be wondering how to proceed amidst uncertainties with current legislation and potential legislation that could come out of the special session. Because there is an earlier time frame to advertise 2010 budget, levy, and appeal estimates, officials should move forward with collecting revenue and expenditure data as part of the budget process. Officials may want to consider the estimated circuit breaker revenue losses using Legislative Services

Agency (LSA) March 2009 report or using the result of a special study done at the local level, if applicable. For 2009 payable 2010, circuit breaker caps fall by 0.5% in all categories, resulting in caps of 1% for homesteads, 2% for other residential, long-term care facilities and agricultural properties, and 3% for personal property and all other real property. When compared to 2009, the lower caps could mean higher revenue losses for some taxing units, amidst economic downturns already occurring that impact excise tax and other revenues used to support the budget. If addressing all of the changes is keeping you awake at night, contact Melissa at mambre@govtconsultingserv.com for assistance. We have a team of professionals who can help you realistically estimate budgets, tax rates, and tax levies thus giving you peace of mind in these challenging times.

Employer Benefits

Many local officials find themselves making tough decisions and adjusting budgets because of declining revenue. It is difficult to provide employee benefits when revenues are declining and reserves are shrinking. Typically, personnel expenses, including salaries and benefits, comprise the majority of a local taxing unit's budget. Because it has such a tremendous impact on budgets, personnel expenses are now one of the most scrutinized areas examined by the board or council.

With the host of benefit plans available, controlling employer benefits is challenging, and evaluating benefits will continue to be in the forefront of decisions made in these tough economic times. GCS team members can help you by evaluating the various group benefit plans available to eligible employees and/or retirees in your area and analyzing how your plan(s) stack up against your neighbors or other similarly sized taxing units. We are prepared to analyze benefit plans that include medical, dental, vision, life, long and short term disability, S125 and other voluntary benefit offerings. For over 20 years, our trained professionals have conducted similar analyses for numerous school corporations in Indiana and can help you evaluate the different options available as well as determine the right mix of benefits for your employees.

We can provide your board or council with information that builds upon what you have by helping you create a reliable and cost-effective benefit package that provides coverage for employees while helping you to be fiscally responsible with current and future benefit commitments.

Taxpayers and Local Government; Communication is Key

Do you find yourself filled with worry that taxpayers are going to show up at your public hearings on the budget? Sometimes the greatest distance you should put between taxpayers and yourself is no distance at all.

During the local budget process, there is ample opportunity for both local officials and taxpayers to be heard. Helping taxpayers understand revenues and expenditures as well as short and long term strategies for the taxing unit can help to minimize questions and ease their concerns over the budget. Transparency in budgeting helps you better explain budgetary needs, anticipated revenues, and how property taxes supplement the budget. Having everyone on the same page should insure a smoother decision-making process for the fiscal body.

Adequately explaining the budget detail should include discussion on a unit's short and long term goals. An outsider looking in may see numbers in a way different from the person who developed the budget. Taking a few moments to explain a line item in the budget may be the difference between receiving an objecting petition and not receiving an objecting petition. It is important to keep in mind that taxpayers have a "vested" interest in programs and services offered as well as the cost of providing those programs and services. As such, they expect to have the opportunity to express their concerns.

I recently sat in on part of a county council meeting in Wabash County. I thought the Council President did a great job of summarizing key points made, addressing taxpayer questions, making note of a needed procedural change, and listening to what taxpayers and department heads were saying in response to the requests before the council. Too often, we can be more focused on sticking to time frames within the agenda rather than allowing for a lively discussion, good or bad. Tackling questions and situations as they arise leads to better two-way communication at the local level and leaves taxpayers and department heads with a sense of being heard. Communication is essential to setting a clear vision and path for the future.

On-line Payments through RevTrak

With an increasing number of transactions (banking, credit card payments, buying airline tickets, and ordering merchandise, etc.) being handled on-line, web-based payments are now an attractive alternative to writing and mailing checks. The following excerpt is from a busy woman who wrote about her experience with RevTrak:

"As a mother, wife, and, of course, taxpayer, I am always looking to simplify the long lists of tasks at hand. I, as all of us, face stacks of papers to file and bills to pay. This daunting bit of life would be so much more manageable if I could sit at my desk, with my favorite cup of coffee and pay the kids' lunch balance, book and uniform rentals, my quarterly property tax bill and my city utilities, all online. Can you imagine? RevTrak did, and thank goodness. Please review the RevTrak business plan for your schools and community for me, for all of us. It's safe, convenient, and intelligent."

RevTrak can help you track revenues from various sources, including property tax payments, court fines, park and recreation, planning, zoning, and animal control fees, trash pick up, and other areas. The RevTrak system is designed to save you time and money. RevTrak offers local officials flexibility because of its ability to increase revenues through reduced collection problems and create an automatic clearinghouse system in your facility. With a short turnaround time, the system can help you monitor discretionary spending, increase customer satisfaction, and maintain better internal controls.

If you are interested in discussing how RevTrak can assist you, please contact Melissa Ambre at mambre@govtconsultingserv.com

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