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SERVING THE COMMUNITY SINCE 1829

Falling through the cracks

A look at the shared pain of proposed budget cuts

By Devon Lash
STAFF WRITER

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PRINT

STAMFORD — Earlier this month, Mayor Michael Pavía took an ax to the city budget in an effort to head his electoral mandate to keep taxes low. He eliminated 120 city jobs and 49 city workers to remedy what he called a culture of "inefficient fiscal discipline" and a state of growing structural costs.

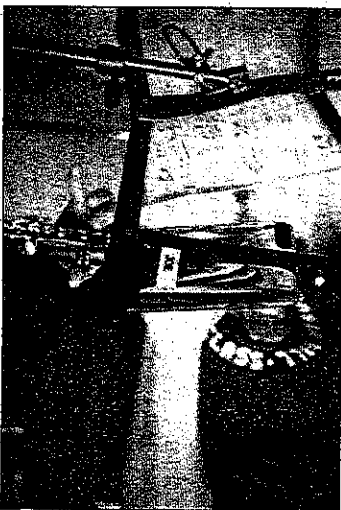
"The last alternative ... was a tax increase," Pavía said during his budget presentation March 8. "Continuing the recent rate of spending would have strapped taxpayers with a 10 percent to 12 percent tax increase, an increase neither acceptable nor responsible," mayoral spokesman Bob Lapinacci said.

But the smaller cuts — the snips and trims to outside agencies, to longtime programs and services — that helped Pavía reach the lowest tax increase proposed by a city mayor in a decade come with a cost, residents said.

And next year, the cuts will reduce or, at worst, eliminate several programs within the arts, youth programming and social services, despite the proposed \$9.3 million in funding for agencies and programs.

"No one wants to cut community service programs, but this is a very different world, and the city has to make very difficult resource decisions," said Lapinacci.

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KATHLEEN O'ROURKE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



DEB MADOLE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Student intern Nathaniel Bullock shows a diamondback terrapin to children at SoundWaters in Stamford on Thursday. He works through a program funded by the city's Youth Service Bureau, which will be affected by budget cuts.

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allocation decisions like every company and every family," Lapinacci said. "By necessity, the pain was shared."
Here's a look at several consequences of the cuts and the residents affected.

YOUTH SERVICES BUREAU

Faced with a 30 percent budget cut, Youth Services Director Terri Drew chose to save bureau's youth initiatives and cut the grant funding provided to outside agencies to subsidize teen employment.

"As with everyone else, we're trying to do more with less while maintaining the excellence and integrity of the programs we have," Drew said.

SoundWaters, an environmental education organization, which will lose funding for its 12 interns, only hears the part about having less.

"We can't guarantee we can run a paid internship program, and a lot of our interns can't afford to volunteer," said Alisha Mullett, SoundWaters' director of education. "I can't imagine not having the interns here."

Vlad Ionescu, a current intern who grew up with SoundWaters' education program in elementary and middle school, said the program has provided real-world experience and confidence at a time when that is difficult for high school students to find.

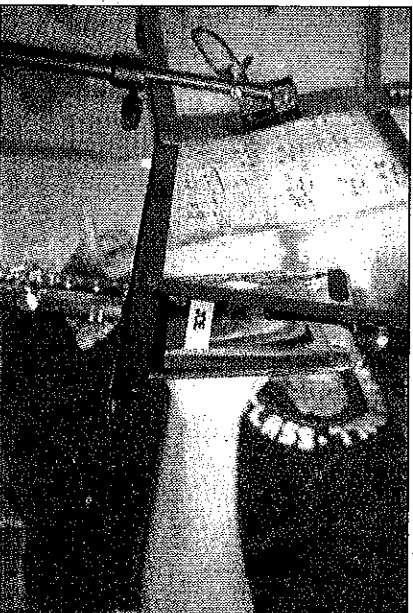
"Right now, it's hard to get a job," the 16-year-old Academy of Information Technology and Engineering junior said. "Without the slight paycheck, it would cut down on the people applying," he said.

Intern programs at the Ferguson Library and the Boys and Girls Club will also lose the grant funding come July.

AMOUNT SAVED: \$130,490

Falling through the cracks

A look at the shared pain of proposed budget cuts



KATHLEEN O'ROURKE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



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Joe Lupinacci, 13, above and at top, practices his clarinet in his living room in Stamford on Friday. With funding eliminated for the city's Project Music, Joe, a seventh-grader at Rippowam Middle School, will no longer be able to take clarinet lessons.

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DNJ MADLER/FOR THE ADVOCATE

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Budget cuts hit programs, services across Stamford

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PROJECT MUSIC

Although the power outage took away his video games and TV shows last week, Joe Lupinacci still had his clarinet.

Tapping the beat in his socks, Joe, a Rippowam Middle School seventh-grader, burst into the chorus of "When the Saints Go Marching In." Although his short fingers stumbled over some keys, occasionally hitting a note out of tune, Joe's four years of lessons in the city's Project Music program left him beaming at his family's applause.

Joe, who has Down syndrome, has trouble with other school-sponsored activities, but Project Music, his mother said, was a fit from the first lesson.

"The music is important, but the sense of belonging, the confidence," Ida Lupinacci trailed off, looking at her son, who still clutched his rented clarinet. "Just the confidence alone is enough."

The mayor's 2010-11 budget cut the \$97,000 in funding for the 30-year-old program, which offers discounted weekly music lessons to 140 kids each school year.

"To cut a city program that doesn't cost very much, it's tragic," director Polly Jimenez said. The program has touched countless kids like Joe and brought music into the lives of thousands, Jimenez said.

Each year, fewer than 50 spots are available for the flute, the oboe, the drums, the trumpet, the violin, the sax and the piano with 18 experienced teachers. More than 90 kids re-register each year, she said.

Krysland Filippi, 24, said that without the program, she never would have discovered her love for the violin.

"Private lessons are extremely expensive, and my parent could not have afforded it for me," she said. "Project

Still working to master "Eye of Tiger" on the clarinet, he was staunch in his defense of the program, baffled at why it would end.

"Because everyone loves Project Music," he said.

AMOUNT SAVED: \$97,000

ENVIRONMENTAL

PROTECTION BOARD

The loss of the extra efforts put forth by the city's Environmental Protection Board will hit homeowners in their bank accounts next year.

The city laid off executive director David Emerson in the wide-ranging job eliminations. With only two staff members to man the office and the loss of partners in Land Use and Technology Management, the services not mandated by the state will be the first carved away.

One of the services likely lost is the participation in the Community Rating System for Floodplain Management, Emerson said.

The system, which requires extensive data input and record keeping, saved Stamford homeowners 15 percent on flood insurance premiums, totaling \$237,000 last year and more than \$750,000 since 2002.

Only nine municipalities in the state participate, and Stamford, which already has the highest savings, was close to achieving a 20 percent savings for homeowners next year.

Premium bills don't even note the savings, Emerson said, calling the loss "an unexplored consequence" of the budget cuts.

The board's partnership with the Building Department also performs early permit evaluations to ensure no wetlands or other protected areas will be affected, saving developers from an abrupt stop later if the state Environmental Protection Agency notices a problem.

"We try to proactively avoid all those potential problems ... and as a consequence of that, resources are protected," Emerson said.

AMOUNT SAVED: \$99,296

FERGUSON LIBRARY

munication supervisor. "From the moment we open, people are waiting outside."

The city cut about \$650,000 from the library budget, a cut that will lead to severe service reductions and potential branch closures, library board members said last week.

Patrons said the cuts come at a time when the library is more important than ever.

"I have a laptop, but I don't have Internet," Byman said, who comes to the library three times a week to check e-mail and job sites and surf the Web.

O'Conner, a retiree and longtime library lover, takes the bus to the Ferguson Library nearly every day.

He reads books, newspapers and magazines, and he checks eBay for the sale of the model trolley cars that used to roam Manhattan avenues.

"Pretty much everything except the DVDs," O'Conner said.

Shortening the hours at the main library would still allow afternoon trips, "but it would also mean staying in the apartment longer," he said.

AMOUNT SAVED: \$41,360

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AMOUNT SAVED: \$138,490

COMMUNITY ARTS

PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

The high hopes of local arts community were dashed when the size of the Community Arts Partnership grant awarded in the mayor's budget was announced March 8.

The grant for the next fiscal year, which funded 20 arts groups in 2009, was cut in half from \$147,000 — what advocates called an already dangerously low level.

Community arts leaders, who hosted the mayor during his candidacy and then took the stage at his inauguration, were baffled.

"Should we not perform anymore?" Connecticut Ballet Director Brett Raphael said.

The World on Stage dance festival scheduled to open at the Palace Theatre next month will probably be the last said Vrunda Patel, executive director of Nasmaskaar Foundation, its host.

"We showcase what people are doing to keep their heritage alive in this county," Patel said of world dance festival that features Indian, Irish and other international cultures.

The goal wasn't make money off ticket sales, but to put audience members in the seats and young dancers on stage, Patel said.

"There is no way to sell tickets at \$50 or \$60; our choice is to not do it," she said.

Vivien White, a longtime arts patron who sat on the city committee to dole out this year's grants, said that while the larger, more established groups will likely see cuts, the smaller, more organic artists may see no funding at all.

The real losses won't be known until the grants are decided later this year, she said.

"Of course people hate paying taxes, I hate paying taxes, but it's not the only things in our lives," she said. "All of these organizations are really so much the soul and spirit of the people who live here."

tuting other city workers, but further cuts to the operations budget by elected officials will halt tram service entirely. Operations Director Ernie Ortega said.

"It's a far walk to the beach, and for senior citizens, it's almost a necessity, and for people with little children who take the chairs," West Side resident Rose Arena said.

The beach ambassadors who staff Cove, Cummings and West beach gates during beach season were also eliminated.

"There were no easy answers this year, and we tried so hard to cut things that would have the least impact," city parks Superintendent Mickey Deonno said.

The ambassadors, he said, were there to answer questions and help park patrons.

"They answered questions like, 'What time does the train stop running? What time are the bathrooms open to?' ... make sure drivers had a parking permit," he said. "What'll happen is, if someone does park illegally, they'll get a ticket."

AMOUNT SAVED: \$60,000

SOCIAL SERVICES

COORDINATOR

When city resident Eloise Knight was told she wouldn't be refunded her security deposit, she cried.

"At this time, you need that money," Knight said, adding that with no damage to her apartment, she knew it was unfair for her landlord to refuse.

She didn't know it was illegal until she found her way to Social Services Coordinator Ellen Bromley's office.

"She sent him a letter, then she had me send him a certified letter, and he still said no," Knight said, recalling the 2008 incident. "The she called him and talked to him on the phone, and whatever she said, it persuaded him to reimburse me."

Bromley's position was eliminated in the 2010-11 budget, as well as half the office staff and, likely, half the services they offer to city residents.

It is unclear how the city will main-