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City budget passes, but remains imbalanced

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Written by Jane Prendergast

Cincinnati's 2012 budget passed easily Wednesday, even inspiring brief applause, but the city's still spending more than it takes in.

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This budget balanced because of \$14 million Convergys will give the city in exchange for reducing the number of jobs the company promises to keep Downtown. It passed without much debate thanks in part to the voters' selection of seven Democrats. The item that drew the most opposition was the \$4.4 million conversion of the City Hall courtyard into an atrium for events, though it still passed.

"Let this be the model for how we operate on every issue for the next two years," Mayor Mark Mallory said after the budget ordinances passed. "Nothing but pride today."

But the budget, like every city budget since 2001, is not structurally balanced.

Councilmen Christopher Smitherman and Charlie Winburn repeatedly brought the imbalance up, saying more cuts should have been made to try to reduce the deficit for 2013. Some Democrats pointed out that Winburn voted last year on a budget that was also structurally unbalanced. Smitherman voted against much of the budget package because of the structural imbalance.

The city's budgets will remain this way, City Manager Milton Dohoney repeated this week, until City Council makes difficult decisions about cutting costs and/or generating more revenue. Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls, who leads the budgeting process, says discussions about priorities will start by the end of January and include workforce size, revenues and programs.

There are two options, she reminded council members Wednesday: Cut costs or raise more revenue. The costs piece is difficult because 90 percent of the city's \$362 million operating budget pays for workers and their benefits. So cutting costs means significant personnel cuts. More revenue means raising fees or taxes. Previous councils couldn't agree to do either.

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“The desire is to move toward a structurally balanced budget,” Qualls said. “But even the city manager acknowledges that’s easier said than done.”

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