



Budget Advocacy in Uncertain Economic Times

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So far 2020 seems to have a surprise around every corner. In Harrisburg, it's incredibly rare that a budget is finalized early, let alone passed by the end of May. The unprecedented nature of the coronavirus pandemic not only called for remote legislative session and emergency remote voting rules for state legislators for the first time ever, but it also resulted in a number of negotiations to allow local governments to continue to conduct business during the sudden shutdown. For several weeks, legislators, counties and CCAP staff examined plans and proposals to address the litany of circumstances we faced, including legislative measures regarding emergency preparations, mitigation and response that were not planned in advance.

FULL SPEED AHEAD

COVID-19 uprooted most spring-time plans, including advocacy

plans for county legislative priorities. Suddenly we went from planning to educate House and Senate Mental Health Caucus members on the need for additional mental health community base funding to navigating a wild ride of negotiations regarding postponing the primary election, seeking emergency relief funding and confirming authority to conduct emergency remote meetings so that counties could resume critical business via Zoom, Skype, Team and the like and still be in compliance with legal requirements.

Like just about everything else, in-person meetings to discuss next steps on policy issues halted briefly and then Harrisburg moved full speed ahead into the virtual world with which we are all now quite familiar. As such, advocacy, conversations and relationships have changed dramatically. Not only has the subject matter been necessarily overshadowed by public health and emergency response

measures, it has had a trickle-down effect on the importance of other once-critical issues and its form has largely taken to writing.

All of the online tools upon which the telework world now relies have become some of the most powerful advocacy tools as well: video meetings, phone calls, emails, social media and online news media to name a few. And with electronic information overload, using a variety of these tools creatively becomes necessary to get the message across.

CAREFUL STEWARDS

So while we have secured a temporary five-month budget for the commonwealth which contains mostly level funding for programs of interest to counties, we anticipate that an uphill battle remains for achieving county priorities and negotiating the remaining seven-month budget during a time that is almost certain to reflect economic downturn.

With initial revenue for the state and economic predictions contain-



ing dim projections, counties will need to be both careful stewards of the funding they have received for the first portion of the year, and avid advocates for a minimum of level funding for the remaining seven-month budget, likely to be negotiated in the fall.

Already legislative leaders have indicated that budget line increases are going to be near impossible, even for counties' top priority of mental health funding as we witness the already increased need related to the effects and stress of the pandemic. Legislators have, in some instances, recognized the deep mental health impacts of the stay-at-home order, job loss and illness; however, raising taxes and finding additional revenue to fund increases for any line item will be a tough sell in the current economic downturn and uncertain environment.

Despite this, strong advocacy must continue. Counties must continue to build strong relationships with their legislators and communicate frequently about the impacts

COVID-19 has had on local communities, county budgets and policy needs. CCAP will forge a head on these efforts, but the best message is always the one that comes from those on the ground, seeing and working with Pennsylvania communities firsthand.

INVESTMENT AND COOPERATION

Your input as a locally elected official is needed now more than ever. Effective messages include examples of how our county priorities and your local county budget has been impacted by the unexpected crises we've seen so far this year. Share your powerful stories, bring your undeniable data showing the good work your county has achieved and also the vital need for increased resources.

Using the virtual skills you've honed over the last several months, ensure your legislators hear your perspective clearly and often. All are in a time of economic stress and uncertainty, but it is the state's responsibility to be a good

partner in providing the necessary resources for local governments to carry out many of their necessary, or in some cases mandated, functions. We must remind leaders at every level that investment and cooperation are in the best interest of all of our constituents throughout the commonwealth.

As we emerge from the initial grip of COVID-19 you may even have the opportunity for a face-to-face meeting with legislators at their district offices. Pack your mask and take advantage of this long-awaited opportunity to have an in-person conversation to discuss county needs to create health and economic stability and support for county government partners. And prepare for working together throughout the fall and winter months to ensure that this budget and other resulting policies align with county priorities. As always, CCAP staff will continue to voice this message in Harrisburg, whether in the Capitol or remotely, so that together we can overcome current hardships and achieve the best outcomes during this trying year. ▾