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Subject: Why I Voted "No" on the Budget

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To: [REDACTED]



Why I voted “No” on the Budget

For nine weeks, City Council vetted the Mayor’s proposed FY2018 budget that was presented on Monday, March 5th. We deliberated over many meetings, most going late into the night. We identified ways to fund our City’s most pressing needs: public safety, public education, and ways to combat generational poverty. We fought long and hard to reduce proposed fee increases to get to a solution that met all of our disparate district needs. On Monday, May 1st, Council deliberated for 18 hours, long into early Tuesday morning, finalizing what would become our final budget. We were able to fully fund the salary decompression issue that had plagued our Police Department to lose many great officers due to a lack of competitive pay. We were able to support fully staffing the Police Department as well, which combine to right the ship of improving Public Safety. We also supported improving the pay to Richmond Public School teachers, an overdue need to support those responsible for preparing our children for the future of our city.

One key reason for our many hours of meetings was the fact that there is a need for City Council to have access to more information about the operations of our City departments. While we were presented with a huge amount of data, most information was provided in inconsistent formats and had limited applicability to support making the tough decisions needed. There needs to be a standard format for which each department presents their budget. It is challenging making comparisons between departments in addressing priorities and needs when the data is inconsistent. Everyone on Council agrees that this process needs to change. We need access to more information, but in a consistent and useable format. City Hall needs to be more transparent with

how funds are spent and moved around to cover other costs. We received the overdue CAFR report for FY2016 on April 24th, which showed \$13 million in unused funds from last year's budget. If you remember back to last spring, City Hall told everyone there wasn't enough money to cut grass in public spaces or fill potholes, only to find out there was plenty of money to go around. This raised many concerns among the nine of us on Council and we knew accountability of the funds we approved in our first budget together must be drastically improved.

On Wednesday, May 3rd, we met to finalize the details of our proposed budget. As the meeting was nearing its end, a budget amendment was introduced that proposed to change the format for how our budget would be allocated and would put restrictions and require the Administration to submit an ordinance to transfer funds between programs. At first glance, we debated how this would impact government operations, in particular limit the ability for City Departments to operate and handle last minute needs or requests. Perhaps it was the fact that we had been in budget meetings for almost 24 hours in three days, but the reality and gravity of this proposal wasn't fully understood by all members of Council. We consented to the change in the format of the budget to what was being called a "Program Based Budget" which would be introduced on Monday, May 8th. What was not made clear, was that any change in the way that the budget is formatted to the Administration, would require an ordinance to move funds between "Programs" to be voted up or down by City Council.

On Monday, May 8th, Council was presented with the drafted amendment with no ability to alter, edit, or amend the proposal. Due to the timeline of approving the budget before May 31st, we had to proceed with the budget as presented to us with the amendment. I voted in support of the proposed change to the budget format, in order to have the ability to reconsider the budget, to address several concerns raised about the new "Program Based Budget" format. City Council procedures only allow a member of the prevailing vote, in this case, in support of, to be able to reconsider the budget. I spent many hours after that vote, discussing and debating what this change in budget format and its potential impact on government operations would be.

Here were my key concerns:

1. What is defined as a "Program"? Is this the best format for our budget? Will a "Program Based Budget" provide us with the accountability we

- need?
2. How will the Administration submit requests for fund transfers to City Council?
 3. There is not a "Program" accounting code in our finance system. How are we defining "Program" for departments to operate?
 4. Each department presented their funding requests in different formats, thus, we had not truly seen or been presented a "Program Based Budget". We are technically voting on a budget that we have not defined fully what it is, how it works, and what its impact will be for City Hall or City Council.

These were my key objections to what was presented. In response to my inquiries about these topics, I was directed to City Council staff for more information. This was alarming to me as these questions should be vetted through the City Council procedures of public meeting deliberations. We have amazing and supportive City Council staff that assist us in understanding how to make policies and they provide great recommendations that we use to debate and discuss during our formal Council and Committee meetings. I am concerned that answers to these questions, from those who presented and supported this drastic change in budget format, were being defined and outlined by City Council staff, not by Council members. You elected us to publicly discuss and make decisions about the budget and government operations, not our staff. Council procedures allow our decisions to have public comment which can also include allowing the Administration to respond and share concerns or impacts that legislation may have on operations. Given that the "Program Based Budget" format was introduced during a special budget meeting, the Administration did not have time to prepare a response to the impact this change would have on operations. City Council procedures create publicly vetted decisions by Council on how to legislate changes to improve government operations. These procedures were not allowed during our process, as only City Council members discussed this budget amendment. Decisions on this very impactful budget format change, were ultimately to be made official and voted on by the entire body of Council, without discussion with the Administration or outlining process or definitions. Council should not implement policies, ordinances, or laws of this magnitude without properly vetting them through City Council procedures.

This brings me to Monday, May 15th's Special Meeting for City Council to vote on the budget. Without being able to address my concerns about having

answers to the questions about this new budget format, procedure, and next steps, I had a hard time voting in support of something that remained undefined. I am proud of the budget created by City Council and feel it embraces many of the needs of City and the First District, however, the new format and process for how a “Program Based Budget” would operate remain unclear, unanswered, and undefined. I could not consciously or responsibly vote in support of a budget amendment that we have not vetted, nor publicly discussed. With so many questions unanswered and processes undefined, I found it difficult to vote “Yes” for the budget as presented. I feel that such an important change in the format of our budget, adding procedures for reporting fund transfers by departments, and the definitions for “Program” must be a well-planned, openly discussed, and publicly voted on matter with conversation between City Council and the Administration to outline expectations and procedures. Now that the budget has passed, with a 6-3 vote, I am committed to getting these concerns addressed and answered, and have started the process and drafted an ordinance to be introduced and publicly discussed.

I wanted to take a moment to explain the events that led up to my decision to vote “No” on the budget. During my campaign, being transparent in my decisions as your Council representative, were a top priority and focus I wanted to bring to this office. I am committed to being open and available to discuss my votes as your Council Representative. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

I will be providing more information and updates about the final approved budget at the next First District Meeting on Thursday June 8th starting at 6pm at Mary Munford Elementary.

Proudly Serving,

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