

City shouldn't take a cut of festival proceeds

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Downtown festivals do great good for Port Washington; reasonable city services should continue to be contributed to the events without charge

Can raising the price of beer limit property tax increases?

If we're talking about beer sold at festivals in Port Washington, some city officials think the answer is yes.

The preliminary 2013 city budget calls for a property tax increase of 1.1%, which is less than the increase allowed by the state tax levy limit.

One very small factor contributing to the city's ability to keep the increase in next year's property taxes small is the revenue expected from a proposed surcharge on beer sold at downtown festivals.

Festivals are big in Port Washington and they are beneficial to the city, treating residents to a good time downtown and showing off the city to throngs of visitors in the hope that some will return to provide further support for the local economy.

The oldest and biggest Port Washington festival, Fish Day, also provides the significant benefit of generating revenue for participating service organizations that return it in good works for the community.

While the festivals have helped the city, particularly the downtown, it should be acknowledged that they've needed the assistance of taxpayer-supported services to do it. A lot is asked of the police and street departments in dealing with crowds that can easily be twice the size of the city's population.

A city fee charged on beer sales would be used to offset some of these costs. The budget proposed by the Finance and License Committee includes revenue of \$5,000 from fees to be charged on festival beer sales.

But in a budget that totals \$8.56 million, the amount is so tiny that it begs the question: For a return that small, is it worth making the city appear as though it's complicating the hard work of the groups that put on the festivals for the good of the city.

Smart cities support festivals for a sound reason—they add economic and social vigor to communities. The Port Washington Common Council of 1964 clearly understood that when the city's first festival was proposed. The aldermen not only avoided any talk of charging Fish Day fees, they voted to give the organizers \$3,000 (more than \$20,000 in today's dollars) to help

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stage the event.

Fish Day has become such a big affair that it requires some police and public works overtime. However, it is well managed by an experienced volunteer organization in a way that makes the city's job easier than it might otherwise be.

That was not the case with this year's Pirate Festival, which failed to clean its grounds as required by the city and left part of the downtown a mess, making extra work for city crews.

A remedy for that, better than a beer surcharge levied on all festivals, would be a clean-up bond paid in advance by festival organizations. Event organizations that meet their responsibilities would get it all back; those that don't would see their deposit used to pay for city services.

As for the proposed surcharge, someone might reasonably ask why it would apply only to beer, not to other drinks and food sold at the events. It sounds a bit like a sin tax.

Whatever it is, it's going to look like a dash of cold water tossed on the enthusiasm of the volunteers and sponsors who produce the festivals that do much for Port Washington.

The idea should be dropped and the beer fee revenue taken out of the budget. It will hardly be noticed.