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### **Ulster budget draws little public comment; analyst says it is balanced**

KINGSTON – Only two people had anything to say about Ulster County’s proposed 2012 budget, during a brief public hearing. One protested proposed elimination of the Consumer Fraud Bureau. The other pleaded to keep the Golden Hill Nursing Home as a county operation.

Golden Hill figured prominently in what took up most of the evening – a detailed analysis by a consultant.

Joseph Stefko, director of public finance with the Center for Government Research, a non-profit focused on government management and public finance, had one quick assessment, at the start of his 30-minute presentation.

“As that tentative budget has been presented to the legislature, based on our analysis, it is balanced,” he said.

Spending and revenues are up about \$10.7 million, or roughly three percent. The budget meets the state two percent tax cap, with some room to spare.

Stefko noted the bulk of the projected revenues in County Executive Michael Hein’s budget would come from transferring Golden Hill to a Local Development Corporation, and bond proceeds associated with that. That would amount to a projected \$8 million.

Another revenue boost would be an additional two percent from sales tax, but Stefko cautioned that can be iffy in a continued tough economy.

Other areas of the budget that can be adjusted could include social services, but Stefko noted adjustments could trigger a change in funding from state and federal governments.

Stefko wrapped up with three general suggestions he emphasized are independent of their analysis of the 2012 budget. All focus on taking a long view.

“We encourage the county, the executive branch and the legislative branch, to begin to envision the budget process as part of a multi-year financial planning strategy, whether that’s a three or a four-year financial planning strategy,” he said. “This is certainly a priority that the state, through its division of budget, has tried to work with.”

Wednesday night’s brief public hearing was the first of three on the 2012 budget. Two more hearings are tonight, at the American Legion in Highland and next Wednesday, at the Woodstock Community Center. Both hearings are at 7 p.m.

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