

Northampton confronts thorny question of spending on wars

By Owen Boss

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NORTHAMPTON - As area legislators continue to look for ways to offer residents the programs and services they need during a period of national economic instability, some of those residents came together Wednesday night to discuss funding for the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its effect on the city's budget.



Whether speaking for or against a resolution endorsed by six city councilors and the mayor calling on U.S. lawmakers to ensure that no more local money be spent to support wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, those who addressed the forum Wednesday night all said they were thankful for the opportunity.

"I support this resolution because these wars are costing our country way too many wonderful young lives," said Marty Nathan. "We are poorer and more at risk now because of these wars and I do not want to risk another life for an unwinnable military action."

Nathan presented city officials with 500 more signatures in favor of the resolution and pledged to collect at least 1,000 before the resolution is taken to a vote.

Col. John Paradis, of Florence, who served in the U.S. Air Force in Iraq in 2004 and Afghanistan in 2006, spoke out against the resolution.

"On my last day in Afghanistan, our Afghan translator turned to me and said, #because of you my daughter can go to school and she will have opportunities that I never thought were possible," Paradis said.

More than 150 area residents crowded into the Community Room at JFK Middle School for the public forum called by the council to gather comments before the resolution is discussed by two subcommittees and the Human Rights Commission and their individual recommendations are sent back to the City Council.

Before opening the meeting, co-sponsor Mayor Clare Higgins encouraged those in attendance to use the gathering to find other members of the community who have a different opinion and arrange to discuss it privately.

"This is not structured as an opportunity for an open dialogue between the public and committee members," Higgins said. "I hope everyone here takes the time to talk to other people here they do not agree with. A respectful dialogue doesn't just happen at public meetings. It can happen between all of you."

Speaking in favor of the resolution was East Center Street resident Tyler Boudreau, 39, an Iraq War veteran serving as an infantryman.

"It is not inherently disrespectful to critique or re-evaluate a military operation," Boudreau said, "particularly if that military operation extends over a period of 10 years, as these conflicts have. It is imperative that we do re-evaluate continually, because the ultimate responsibility for American wars lies with the American people. We have to be able to discuss without passion or prejudice the courses of action before us and their costs and their consequences."

Paradis, opposing the resolution, said, "We are at war with a network known as al-Qaida, and its terrorist affiliates who support efforts to attack our country and our allies and to indiscriminately kill American citizens, including, if they were given the chance, right here and now, every person, man, woman, and child in this room without mercy or any remorse."

Andrew Trushaw, of Bridge Street, said he didn't come to the meeting to speak for or against the resolution, but said he felt it should be brought to a citywide vote.

"I think that it is wrong for the City Council to speak on behalf of the whole entire city of Northampton without actually knowing what the real percentage is," Trushaw said.

Kitty Callaghan, 54, of Golden Drive, said that after spending the last 25 years representing the city's low-income tenants as Western Mass. Legal Services attorney, she believed "war dollars should be brought home to address the housing crisis in this community."

"To show you the magnitude of our housing problem, in 2006 the Northampton Housing Authority opened their waiting list for one week and had 800 applicants. As of today, there are 100 applicants still on that waiting list," Callaghan said. "I would like Congress to bring home our war dollars so we can provide enough housing vouchers so that local people aren't struggling and aren't homeless."

Another U.S. Air Force veteran at the meeting, Col. Gary Keefe, 46, of Avis Circle, said he disagreed with the proposal because he thought many city residents' expectation that Northampton would get any more federal dollars as a result was unrealistic.

"If the council wants this resolution to go forward, I agree with Andy Trushaw, put it on a ballot and let the city vote on it," Keefe said, adding, "The city is not going to receive a big check. That's not how the government's budgeting system works."

Keefe also questioned the American Friends Service Committee's claim that the city of Northampton has collectively paid or become indebted to the amount of \$111.7 million in federal taxes over the course of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

"I don't know where they came up with this \$111.7 million dollars," Keefe said. "I'd like us to apply that same factor to find out what illegal immigration is costing the city of Northampton."

Elliot Fratkin, 62, of Massasoit Street, said he thought the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq could not possibly end in military victory for the United States.

"Half of the country today feels that they don't know why we are still in these wars," Fratkin said. "I urge the City Council to pass this resolution, bring our war dollars home and send a clear message to our representatives and state senators."

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