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Northfieldborrows to pay bills

\$437,000 budget shortfall sparks criticism of township planning for public safety building

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BY JOHN MULCAHY
News Staff Reporter

Northfield Township officials apparently failed to consider \$497,000 in expenses already incurred for their new public safety building when they approved a final spending plan for the building in the spring of 2002.

As a result, the township had to borrow \$437,000 to avoid a deficit for the fiscal year that ended June 30.

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The borrowing is being criticized by some township residents who say the financial problems are the fault of township officials who did a poor job of planning for a new fire and police station. They're asking why the new building will cost



nearly half a million dollars more than the \$6.8 million in bonds that the township issued to cover the cost.

The \$497,000 was spent out of the general fund to buy land for the building and for initial engineering, architectural and planning work after voters had approved \$3.8 million in 1999. The board later approved a much bigger building to combine police and fire stations, authorizing an additional \$3 million in September 2001. The \$497,000 was to be refunded to the general fund, a fact apparently not taken into account when the final \$6.8 million plan for building the new building was approved.

Several township board members said they are at a loss to explain how they failed to take such a large chunk of money into account.

"That's what we're all asking ourselves," Clerk Michele Manning said. Manning said she was not aware of the overspending until it started to become apparent the township did not have the money to pay all of its bills this year.

Asked "Who dropped the ball?" Treasurer Cynthia

Wilson said, "We all did."

Without explicitly accepting blame, Supervisor Michael McFarland implied he would have to shoulder a lot of responsibility.

"I'm the one sitting on top, so I guess it all comes back to me," McFarland said.

Manning, McFarland and Trustee Daniel Rowe were on the construction committee.

Rowe said there was a line in the construction budget to repay the general fund, but there were not sufficient funds in the building fund to pay it and the other building expenses. Rowe also said the board arrived at the \$3 million additional bonding figure in part because that was how much board members felt comfortable having to pay off through the general fund.

That's not good enough for township resident Udo Huff, a member of Northfield Neighbors, a group that has been critical of McFarland, especially over his handling of a proposed large housing development that the group opposes.

"It's quite clear that neither the township nor the board knows the true cost of the public safety building," Huff said.

The final cost of the building project won't be known until an audit is complete in the fall, Rowe said.

Huff maintains the building project should have had a clear, itemized budget in advance. "There is no cap for the costs of the building," he said. "I think a lot of people in the township are losing confidence that we

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have proper planning going on."

As the end of the fiscal year approached June 30, McFarland said the township decided to borrow the money to meet its bills on the advice of its bond council because it could get a 2.2 percent interest rate.

The township also has used up most of a \$1.1 million reserve it had been accumulating from 1992 to June 2001, Rowe said.

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