

Holyoke City Council says no to finance fix plan — for now

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HOLYOKE — City leaders in Holyoke are trying to fix how the city handles its money, but a plan to do that didn't get enough votes to move forward Tuesday night.

A modified version of the Municipal Modernization Act, called the Municipal Modernization Ordinance, failed in front of the full City Council this week. The proposal needed 9 votes to pass. It got 8 yes votes and 5 no votes, so it failed.

The ordinance would have combined some city departments and make it easier to hire staff. It also aimed to improve how the city tracks and spends money.

After the vote, colleagues Councilor Juan Anderson-Burgos asked to reconsider their vote but later changed his mind and withdrew the request. "I've tried to compromise," Anderson-Burgos said. "But come November, we have to make changes."

Councilors voting for the proposal were Michael Sullivan, Israel Rivera, Jenny Rivera, Tessa Murphy-Romboletti, Anderson Burgos, Kocayne Givner, Patti Devine and Meg Meg Magrath-Smith.

Opposed were [Howard Greaney Jr.](#), Linda Vacon, David Bartley, Kevin Jourdain and Carmen Ocasio.

Israel Rivera, chair of the ordinance committee, said the city has been talking about this for months. He worked with other councilors to make changes to the original plan. Rivera said the city needs to think long term and not just try to fix things quickly.

Some councilors, like Vacon, Sullivan and Jourdain, think the city should first hire a qualified treasurer. Voters approved that idea last year. Jordan said the city should do that right away, especially since the current treasurer's term ends in February.

"This (Holyoke's poor finance practices) has been going on for a while," Rivera responded. "One person can't solve it all. We need a practical solution."

Givner said she agreed with the plan to modernize. She said the state has sent letters for years telling Holyoke to update its financial systems. Even when the city had a good treasurer, the job was too big for one person, she said.

"I agree with the voters — we need a treasurer," Givner said. "It's clear we also need to modernize how we handle money."

Vacon disagreed. She said the treasurer's office is a mess and shouldn't be combined with another department until it's fixed, once that's done then she like to talk about establishing other roles.

"You need to fix one department before you mix it with another," Vacon said.

"That's just not good business."

McGrath-Smith said she supports trying something new, even if it's a big change.

"Right now, things aren't clear or transparent," she said. "Government should be transparent. These are taxpayer dollars."

The state's Department of Revenue has warned Holyoke that its financial systems are outdated. Some councilors worry that if things don't improve, the state might take control of the city's finances.

Israel Rivera said even if the ordinance passed, it wouldn't have fixed everything right away. He also said it's hard to hire top talent for a treasurer because the city doesn't offer high enough pay, so other supports like a chief administration and finance officer should be in place. "You could be the most qualified treasurer, but we're not going to get that person if we don't pay them enough," he said.

McGrath-Smith said she's tried to compromise and hopes others will too. She said the city's financial problems are serious and need real solutions. "This is about making sure taxpayer money is handled the right way," she said. "Right now, our system isn't working."

In the end, the vote failed, and the city is still deciding what to do next.