

*[Excerpt from the Oct. 2, 2020 morning email from The Square Beacon]*

On Wednesday [the night when the final budget proposal was presented to the city council], several Bloomington city councilmembers expressed some pretty bitter disappointment that the mayor had not incorporated a single request from city councilmembers to change the budget, from the time it was introduced in August until now. I understand the frustration.

But it looks like this is the process the city council has embraced for more than a decade. Namely, councilmembers lobby the mayor privately to get what they want out of the budget. That leaves it to the mayor to sort out whether there is majority support for the request for a change.

I think a fair counterpoint for the mayor to have made on Wednesday would have been: Show me a city council vote with majority support on any of these requests you're so disappointed I didn't incorporate into the budget. Of course, the city council can't point to any such votes, because they don't take votes on amendments to the budget documents. What they do is take straw polls that are supposed to indicate their general mood about a specific department's proposal. These straw polls have literally zero legal significance. The straw polls are mere Kabuki theater.

What's the alternative to Kabuki theater? The city council could use their August sessions to vote on amendments to the budget documents, and ship the budget, as amended, back to the administration with a resolution requesting that the changes be made in the final version. Then the council would have a public record of their requested changes—if there are any changes that had majority support.

But let's imagine that there is 5–4 majority support on the city council for an amendment to increase sworn police officers from 100 to 105. Should the mayor feel compelled to make a change to the proposed budget based on that 5–4 vote? I say no. That's because it would require the mayor to set aside his own view on the question. It's a judgement call.

The reverse would also apply. Let's say the amendment failed on a 4–5 vote. Could the mayor go ahead and say, OK, I was actually persuaded by the arguments of the minority on that question and I'm going to go ahead and incorporate that amendment into the final budget? Sure.

Taking votes on amendments, instead of taking straw poll Kabuki theater votes, would at least put the council on public record about what changes had majority support and which did not. That would be a transparent way to handle the back-and-forth between legislative and executive branches.