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But 2013 spending plan plagued by lost revenue protects important services

The Ozaukee County Executive Committee last week proposed a 2013 budget that cuts a number of jobs but largely keeps services unchanged for residents, officials said.

The county is selectively downsizing, officials said, eliminating some positions that are currently filled as well as many that are vacant.

It's also replacing some full-time positions with part-time ones and consolidating others.

Salaries would be frozen except for sheriff's deputies, who will receive a 1% raise per their contract, officials said.

Although the county started the budget process with the goal of freezing the tax levy, the committee agreed to increase the levy by $132,000 to reflect the amount of new construction — the maximum allowed by the state.

The end result is a proposed $78.3 million budget, a decrease of 3.9% from last year's budget of $81.4 million.

Revenues are projected to decrease 5.4%, from $63.1 million this year to $59.7 million in 2013.

The resulting property tax levy, including $531,706 for the library system, is $19.3 million, an increase of .76% from last year's levy of $19.2 million.

The tax rate for areas with libraries is projected to be $1.84 per $1,000 equalized valuation, an increase of 10 cents from last year's levy of $1.74.

The rate for areas without libraries is $2.12 per $1,000 equalized valuation.

The County Board will review the proposed budget when it meets Wednesday, Oct. 17.

A public hearing on the proposed budget will be held at 7 p.m. Monday, Nov. 5, with the County Board slated to act on the spending plan at its Wednesday, Nov. 7, meeting.

"This was among the hardest, if not the hardest, budget I've had to deal with," County Administrator Tom Meaux said. "The focus has been trying to squeeze out efficiencies."

Instead of massive cuts, the county is proposing myriad small changes to make the budget work, he said.

"We're still looking at creative solutions," he said.

County Board Chairman Rob Brooks noted that the county budget has been trimmed from

$90 million in 2011 to $78 million next year.

“We’ve taken about a $12 million hit over two years. It’s getting to the point where we’ve squeezed just about every drop out of there without changing the services we provide,” he said. “Any further cuts and we’re going to be reducing services.”

While many of the reductions in the budget come from personnel, those cuts aren’t written in stone, Brooks said.

“We have assured people that if it doesn’t work out, if those cuts are too deep, we will make adjustments,” he said. “We have the ability to do that.”

One of the big factors forcing this year’s reductions is the loss of revenue, officials said.

The most significant loss is $1.6 million in prisoner boarding revenue. Until this year, the program brought in enough revenue for the county to use proceeds to offset the tax levy.

Because of the magnitude of the loss, its impact was felt across the board, Meaux said.

“There was no way they (the sheriff’s department) could have absorbed the brunt of it,” he said, adding that it was only fair that everyone take the hit since they all realized the benefits through the years.

Eliminating vacant positions is expected to save the county almost $500,000.

“Almost all these employee changes are being done through retirement or attrition,” Brooks said.

Others are a result of reorganizations, Meaux said. With the pending retirement of department head John Buhler, the technology department will be brought into the county’s Department of Administration and overseen by Assistant County Administrator Jason Dzwinel.

Some full-time jobs are being filled with part-time workers. In the clerk of courts office, for example, two full-time jobs will be replaced by four part-time positions.

A handful of jobs will be lost as the county privatizes some services, Brooks said. Neither he nor Meaux would specify which services are being considered for this, saying they have not yet discussed the matter with the affected employees.

And some jobs will be lost as state and federal funding for their positions is eliminated, Brooks said. For example, the county is losing $145,000 in grants for its immunization programs and is cutting two public health nurses who work in that program.

The duties handled by other positions being eliminated, such as the family living educator in the University of Wisconsin Extension office, will be moved around, Brooks said.

“Some things will be picked up, some will be dropped,” he said.

About 40% of that position was designated for a criminal justice coalition, and Brooks said the county added $15,000 to the budget to have someone else handle those duties.

A quarter of that position was dedicated to financial education, something offered by numerous financial institutions, churches and non-profit agencies, he added.

There is one significant change in the sheriff’s department, Brooks said. Although sworn law-enforcement officers will continue to serve as jailors, they will no longer be classified as having protected status, Brooks said.

By doing this, the county will only be required to pay 12% for their retirement benefits and the jailors will be required to pay 6% of that contribution.

For employees classified as protected, the retirement contribution is 19% and the county pays the entire amount, he said.

Because deputies are receiving a salary increase, Brooks said, they may also be faced with some insurance changes that other employees are not.

The county is looking at plan design changes in its health insurance to keep the rates flat, Meaux said, but these are not expected to result in additional employee contributions or payments.

A number of organizations that receive grants from the county, such as the Ozaukee County Fair Board, Railroad Consortium and Milwaukee Seven, will not be funded this year, Meaux said.

The decision not to provide a grant to the fair board reflects the fact the county made a major investment in new infrastructure and buildings at the fairgrounds, Brooks said.

“Clearly there are additional revenue opportunities,” he said, referring to the fact the board could charge admission to the fair.

The county is also counting on additional revenue to make its budget work. The budget calls for an increase of $440,000 in sales tax revenue and $225,000 in fees paid to the Register of Deeds office — a continuation of trends being seen this year, Meaux said. Sales tax revenue alone is 3.4% higher this year than was projected, he noted.

The county does not plan to offset the tax levy with general fund reserves, Meaux said, although it will use $130,000 in departmental reserves for that purpose.

However, the county will use part of the general fund reserve fund to make up for shortfalls in this year’s budget — including as much as $1.4 million from prisoner boarding, he said.