

County looks at budget

By Amy Smith Union staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, September 9, 2014 8:50 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Finance Committee kicked off its week-long budget hearings Monday with proposed 2015 expenditures reflecting a modest increase in the property tax levy.

However, to help keep expenditures in check, the county is planning to eliminate its Personal Care Program operated through the Health Department.

County Administrator Benjamin Wehmeier presented an overview of his proposed budget to the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors' Finance Committee Monday morning, recommending that the panel approve a property tax levy of \$28,430,843, representing an increase over this year's \$27,004,367.

From that total tax levy, the county contributes separately to the Jefferson County Health Department, proposed to receive \$884,897 in the coming year, and the county library system, slated for \$1,012,092. Therefore, the proposed countywide tax levy after those contributions are subtracted would be \$26,533,854.

“As we start to look at our 2015 budget, we want to make sure the choices and decisions we’re recommending to the county board of supervisors are ones we can move forward with and not just a one-year deal,” Wehmeier said. “That we’re looking down the road, and making the best fiduciary choices and recommendations but still providing the services needed to the residents of not only the county, but the region as well.”

The proposed budget, if adopted, would result in a countywide property tax rate of \$4.3955 per \$1,000 equalized valuation, representing a 13-cent increase over last year.

The goal for the county’s department heads in drawing up their proposed budgets for the coming year, Wehmeier stated in his budget summary, was to provide a 2-percent reduction in operational expenditures, look toward a new operating norm, and look at health insurance and wage projections versus revenue sustainability.

The tough guidelines resulted in multiple proposed personnel and program changes throughout departments, including the elimination of the Personal Care Program after the retirements of two Health Department employees whose positions will not be refilled. The necessary budget cuts also could result in the reduction of both a full-time central service maintenance position to a full-time account position in the sheriff’s office to part time.

“Some of these departments — a 2-percent reduction — they can’t do it without all of the changes,” Wehmeier noted.

Expenditures during the year are proposed to total \$44.65 million, down from \$84.28 million in 2014. Most of that decrease comes from the new highway facility construction project, which was approved for a construction budget of \$15 million, ending the county’s short debt-free run.

Growth in the economy will help out slightly, as the county anticipates a slight increase in sales tax revenue, total net new construction of \$218,000 and an increase in utility tax of \$19,000, according to the county administrator.

Although the county sees tough cuts head, Wehmeier said that he was, overall, pleased with the work put in by the

department heads to reach a balanced budget.

“We need to keep having conversations about how we manage the programs we need to manage and keep the operations needed so that our residents and community members are not negatively impacted, and how to make them all work together,” Wehmeier noted. “We’re not the only ones having these conversations. They’re having them across the state and across the region about how to make these things balance and be good stewards.”

Monday’s meeting also kicked off the individual budget presentations by department heads, which will continue Wednesday, Thursday and Friday before the committee forwards its final budget recommendation to the full county board.

The committee learned Monday that the Health Department is looking at a department reorganization in the coming years with an increasingly aging workforce. Several staff members are approaching retirement, including two positions this spring that will not be refilled.

The result will be elimination of the Personal Care Program, which provides, through a contracted staffing agency, in-home assistance for people with disabilities that make it difficult for them to leave their home. It was noted that without the program, many of these people would end up in a group or nursing home, which is less cost effective than maintaining a person in their home.

The department, which currently serves about 150 Jefferson County residents, plans to eliminate the \$1 million program, which is funded through the patients it serves, in order to stay within the 2015 budget. The program would put the Health Department about \$100,000 over budget.

A company in Watertown is the only other in-home care facility in the Jefferson County area.

The panel OK’d the department’s budget without contest.

Other department budgets preliminarily approved Monday included those of Management and Information Systems, the board of supervisors, Emergency Management, corporation counsel’s office, the county coroner, Central Services, Human Resources and the Land Information Office.

Departmental budget presentations will continue Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at 8:30 a.m. before the County Finance Committee will approve its final recommendation to the county board next week.