

County panel eyes budgets of sheriff's office, Human Services

By Amy Smith, Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, September 11, 2014 9:26 am

JEFFERSON — Individual budget presentations continued Wednesday as the Jefferson County Finance Committee was briefed on departmental initiatives to meet spending expectations.

Department heads were expected to show a 2-percent reduction in operational expenditures for the 2015 budget.

The county board of supervisors' Finance Committee is recommending a 2015 property tax levy of \$28,430,843, a \$102,222 increase over this year's amount.

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 hike from last year.

The sheriff's office, which makes up the largest portion of the tax levy with a requested \$11,758,545 — a 0.3-percent increase in the levy — had a tight budget due to the request of several capital budget purchases. Most of the department's operational budget goes toward paying wages and insurance costs for county employees, which rise year over year, but a portion of the increase is due to the implementation of a 911 phone interface carrying a \$380,000 pricetag.

The interface is needed as the sheriff's office's current service provider will no longer provide support in the coming months.

“We held on to the last possible moment to make the change, and in 2015, we need to move forward, said Chief Deputy Jeffrey Parker.

In addition, the department will purchase several capital budget items at a cost of \$286,000, including several patrol vehicles.

Parker, however, explained that the department was able to achieve additional revenue through a partnership with Tyson Foods Inc. The company had requested the service of eight Jefferson County inmates, ultimately hiring 11 applicants. At \$17 a day, the service provided to Tyson could contribute an additional \$62,000 in funding for the department per year.

“Not that we are able to say this relationship will continue forever, but as long as we can provide these inmates, it's a source they can depend on,” Parker said. “They were very intrigued in maintaining this relationship.”

Parker noted that because of the unpredictability of the relationship, the department noted a potential increase in its Huber work-release program fees of \$15,000.

“Not only is it a revenue source ... and not only is it about money, it's also an opportunity to help (the inmates) in terms of how they transition into that next stage of their life,” County Administrator Ben Wehmeier told the finance panel.

Parker added that Tyson, too, hopes to keep these inmates as employees after they are released from incarceration. Additionally, the department raised its Huber and booking fees, as well as its fee for inmates to receive medical care, by \$1. Even so, Parker noted, the department still remains under the state average for the noted fees.

Finance Committee Chairman Richard Jones questioned the chief deputy on the large number of overtime hours logged and whether hiring additional staff would be more cost-efficient.

Sheriff Paul Milbrath was quick to reply that the department is far better off logging overtime than rehiring the four employees cut several years ago.

Parker added that a recent arbitration agreement between the deputies' union — which will allow the department to use a sergeant to cover overtime hours — should help cut back on some of the expense of the double-time hours.

“The thing that is really hurting the sheriff's department right now is actually revenues versus the expenditures, so we really focused in on those this budget season,” Wehmeier said.

Meanwhile, Human Services and department head Kathi Cauley fared better with a levy request of \$8,213,910, resulting in a reduction of 1.1 percent and meeting its goal in reduced operation expense “by well over \$200,000,” according to Wehmeier.

With the help of additional revenues of \$315,000, thanks to state funding for its comprehensive community service program, the department plans to add two positions within that division.

One would be a children's therapist, which would address the ongoing shortage in that area across Wisconsin. That position also would collect revenue as it is funded by insurance.

The second position would be in the Lueder Haus, providing crisis stabilization and community outreach for people with mental health problems.

“It's the first time the state has added money to mental health since probably 1992,” Cauley noted.

The department also was able to reduce expenses in the child and alternate care program with a number of initiatives, including the reuniting of children with their family in a more timely fashion. Those initiatives have resulted in a savings of about \$500,000, Cauley said.

She noted that with the savings, the department will fund a new position in the Juvenile Justice Division due to a recent increase in the number of juvenile delinquents. The position will be needed, she said, in light of an upcoming legislative ruling that, if passed, would bring 17-year-old criminal offenders back into the juvenile court system rather than being tried as adults.

Additionally, the department plans to fund several capital projects with its surplus revenues, including the purchase of an electronic health record system.

The Highway Department was able to reduce its levy by about \$200,000, yet still fund three highway construction projects in 2015, including reconstruction of County Highway A in Lake Mills and County Highway J, as well as the resurfacing of County Highway A toward Watertown. The project, mostly funded with tax levy dollars, also will receive funding by a partial funds carryover and a state highway grant.

Other department budgets preliminarily approved Wednesday included those of Parks, Child Support, Economic Development and Planning and Zoning, and the offices of the county administrator, clerk of courts and county treasurer.

The panel OK'd all departments' budgets without contest.

Departmental budget presentations will continue Thursday and Friday at 8:30 a.m. before the Jefferson County Finance Committee votes next week on its final recommendation to be sent to the full county board.