

County eyes panel to seek cost-reducing solutions

By Amy Smith Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, October 30, 2014 9:26 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Administration and Rules Committee has recommended forming an ad hoc committee tasked with finding a solution to rising operational costs.

The Task Force on County Government Organization and Operations, if approved when the full Jefferson County Board of Supervisors meets Nov. 12, will conduct research and make policy recommendations to reduce operational costs while maintaining high quality services for the citizens of Jefferson County.

A need for the task force comes as the county continuously struggles with operational costs that are rising at a faster rate than revenues.

County Administrator Ben Wehmeier challenged department heads to reduce their operating costs by 2 percent for the 2015 budget, ultimately cutting the county's overall expenditures in half, compared to this year.

Estimated expenditures in the 2015 budget total \$44,653,372, down from 2014's total of \$84,508,62. Last year, however, the county had revenues of \$35,993,802, more than next year's estimated \$22,096,002. In addition, the trend has resulted in a call to action by the Administration and Rules Committee, which believes the county's best option is to determine how the government can operate more efficiently without reducing or eliminating the services it currently provides.

The task force will be made up of between seven and nine members consisting of county board supervisors, county employees, elected officials and other interested participants. The members will be appointed by the county board chairperson.

The Administration and Rules Committee previously was concerned that the number of members might be too low, but corporation counsel Blair Ward assured the group that the number of members will not limit the task force's ability to function.

"The goal of this committee is to talk to other people," Ward told the panel at a meeting Wednesday. "They are (the members) the decisionmakers, but they aren't the only source of information."

County Board Chairperson Jim Schroeder added that he believes many people will be interested in serving on this task force.

If approved by the full board, the task force will report its findings and recommendations to the county board by May 12, 2015, at which time it will be dissolved unless additional research is needed. If the task force's formation is not approved in November, the next time the board could vote on the group without a special meeting would be February.

The Administration and Rules Committee intends for the task force to begin its duties before the first of the year.

Also, Wednesday, the committee reviewed the decision to include resolutions, ordinances and reports in the county board minutes, which are published in the county's official newspaper, now the Daily Jefferson County Union.

The decision to include the additional information was made in April for a six-month trial period.

Schroeder noted that the additional information is “blowing our budget out of the water.”

The county budget includes \$15,000 to publish meeting minutes, and as of September, the board had spent about \$14,000 of that.

Committee Chairperson Amy Rinard said she did not see how the county could cut the information further, as it is important for the public to have access to county proceedings.

The committee agreed to give the action another six months to see if the costs lessen over time, noting that the board has passed several unusually large ordinances this year.