

County supervisors adopt 2015 tax levy

By Amy Smith, Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, November 13, 2014 8:54 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Board of Supervisors on Wednesday adopted a 2015 tax levy that is up 2.96 percent from this year's amount.

The levy passed with no amendments to the budget originally presented in October.

Chairperson Jim Schroeder noted that this marked the first time in about 20 years that any current supervisors could remember a budget passing without an amendment.

“The reason why the entire budget process has gone so smoothly is really a testament to our county administrator, Ben Wehmeier, and the conclusive and collegiant process he used in developing the budget,” Schroeder said.

In a 27-1 vote with Carl Zentner dissenting, the board adopted the countywide tax levy of \$28,398,206, representing an increase of \$1,393,839 from this year's \$27,004,367.

That results in a countywide tax rate of \$4.3917 per \$1,000 equalized value, which represents about a 13-cent increase from this year's \$4.2655.

From that total tax levy, the county contributes separately to the Jefferson County Health Department, proposed to receive \$875,223 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 \$26,510,891.

The increase is a result of the \$15 million debt the county took on to build the new highway shop facility. Without the addition of the debt — about a 2-cent increase in the mill or tax rate — the county's overall tax levy and operational expenses actually have decreased from this year.

The actual general operations tax rate of \$4.1962 creates a reduction of \$.0693 per \$1,000 from the 2015 general operations.

Wehmeier challenged department heads to reduce their operating costs by 2 percent for the 2015 budget in order to balance out the potential tax levy increase created by the debt.

Several other large items impacting the 2015 budget include changes to the county employee insurance plan, multiple capital projects, and the dissolution of the Health Department's Personal Care Program.

The healthcare change is in response to the increasingly high health insurance rates. The weighted average increase of premiums for the county's top three health insurance providers this year will be 7.75 percent — an increase of about \$542,000.

Health insurance for all county employees enrolled in the county's plan costs about \$7 million each year, with the county contributing more than 95 percent or about \$6.75 million. Wehmeier estimated during a previous meeting that about 90 percent of employees are enrolled in the county's healthcare plan.

The proposed change to the healthcare plan will switch county employees from a no-deductible plan to a low-

deductible plan, saving the county up to \$95,000 in the budget. That will allow the county to address several capital items, including an air conditioner in the Workforce Development Center building, a back-up generator for Lueder Haus and funds for a comprehensive facilities assessment.

Another cost-saving measure in the 2015 budget was the 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.

The Health Department currently works as a middle-man between the nearly 130 patients served and an outsourced company by completing all of the billing and administrative work.

All patients now will be transitioned into a new program and will continue to receive the same level of care. The \$1 million program, if continued, would have put the department about \$100,000 over budget.

Also, Wednesday, the board approved a recommendation from the Administration and Rules Committee to form an ad hoc committee tasked with finding a solution to rising operational costs.

The newly formed Task Force on County Government Organization and Operations 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.

Wehmeier challenged department heads to reduce their operating costs by 2 percent for the 2015 budget, ultimately resulting in a slight increase of the county's overall expenditures by \$47,552.

In addition, the trend has resulted in a call to action by the Administration and Rules Committee, which has indicated that 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 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.

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