

County task force seeking operational expense cuts

By Amy Smith Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, January 15, 2015 9:53 am

JEFFERSON — A task force created to find solutions to Jefferson County’s growing operational expenses and falling revenues met Wednesday for the first time.

Members of the Task Force on County Government Organization and Operations include: Jefferson County Human Services Director Kathi Cauley; Jefferson County Supervisors Jennifer Hanneman, George Jaeckel, Russell Kutz, Steve Nass and Jim Schroeder; Jefferson County District Attorney Sue Happ, citizens Timothy Smith and Ron Krueger; Jefferson County Parks Department director Joe Nehmer, and Jefferson County Administrator Benjamin Wehmeier.

Hanneman will serve as chairperson, Kutz as vice chairperson and Smith as secretary.

The Jefferson County Administration and Rules Committee recommended forming an ad hoc committee tasked with finding a solution to rising operational costs. The full Jefferson County Board of Supervisors approved the panel on Nov. 12.

Duties of the task force include conducting research and making policy recommendations to reduce operational costs while maintaining high-quality services for the citizens of Jefferson County.

“As in all levels of government, our challenge is that our revenues are basically flat, and our expenses continue to increase,” Schroeder said. “So if we don’t do something, eventually we’re going to have to make cuts.

“The idea is sustain what we’re doing, providing the services that our stakeholders and people of Jefferson County expect.”

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

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

Instead of making further cuts, the Administration and Rules Committee felt it in the county’s best interests to create a task force focused on finding alternative solutions to heavy cuts in the county’s services and determining how to operate more efficiently without reducing or eliminating the services it currently provides.

“I think that this is a wonderful opportunity for us to see how we can do things better,” Schroeder said. “I encourage you to think big ... and into the future for people that are even born yet. “We believe this corporation known as Jefferson County government can be strong and sustainable into the future.”

Schroeder added that it is important that this committee be transparent with no hidden agendas or surprises when questioning “how can we do things better to sustain the things we are doing to hopefully build on them in the future?”

Transparency is important because surveys show that the public does not have confidence that the government is doing their job, Schroeder said.

“That’s more true for the state and federal level of government, but it is also very true for the local level,” he said. “I believe that we can use this process as a model to show that we can do things to sustain our services.”

Wehmeier noted that right now, the county is at a good financial standpoint, but those lines are beginning to cross. The goal of the committee is to look into the future, so that the county can avoid potential conflicts and has a financial plan for five to 10 years down the road.

“Sometimes if your back’s against the wall, you are not going to make a good financial decision,” Wehmeier said.

The first step in the task force’s goal will be to look at audits of several of the county’s largest departments — Human Services, sheriff’s office, MIS, Highway Department and Administrative Services — to determine what suggestions were made and what, if any, actions were taken.

The task force plans to meet every two weeks, starting with its next meeting on Jan. 28 to review the budget and Human Services audit. It will meet Feb. 13 to review the Administrative Services, MIS and Highway Department audits, followed by the sheriff’s office audit at a later date.

The task force also hopes to hear department heads offer their own ideas on cost-saving measures. In addition, throughout the process, it would like to discuss possible ways to collaborate and share resources with area villages, towns and counties.

Nass noted that he would like to discuss some form of a capital improvement plan and how that could affect the entire county operation as a whole.

The task force will report its findings and recommendations to the county board by May 12, at which time it will be dissolved unless additional research is needed.