

## Proposed county tax levy up a tad

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, September 15, 2015 9:15 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Finance Committee on Monday kicked off the first of four budget hearings, during which it learned that proposed 2016 expenditures reflect a slight increase in the countywide tax levy.

Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier presented an overview of his proposed budget, recommending that the panel approve a countywide tax levy of \$26,721,957, of which \$1,138,284 is debt. The proposed levy represents an increase over \$26,510,891 this year.

Not included in the tax levy are funds of \$838,207 for the Jefferson County Health Department and \$1,039,235 for the county library system. Including the noncountywide funds, the total tax levy is \$28,599,399.

The total tax levy is calculated by adding together estimated expenditures (\$71,898,477) and subtracting estimated revenues (\$39,223,813) and other finance sources (\$4,075,265).

The proposed budget, if adopted, would result in a countywide property tax rate of \$4.3259 per \$1,000 equalized valuation, translating into a 7-cent-per-\$1,000 decrease from last year.

“Last year, we requested all departments do a 2-percent reduction for the levy,” Wehmeier said. “We pretty much had every department hit that, with the exception of the Sheriff’s Department. A flat line does not work long term. For numerous reasons, we did it last year.”

The county administrator said 2016 is geared toward having department heads find ways to work together to discover operational expenditures, new revenues and efficiencies. They also were challenged to look at new operating norms and were told that the health insurance and wage projections versus revenue is unsustainable.

“We still gave a tax levy target goal (of \$26,149,469),” Wehmeier said. “Pretty much every department hit it except one.”

The recommended contingency budget is just under \$550,000, according to the county administrator.

Wehmeier proposed multiple program and personnel changes, maintaining health insurance and an ongoing review of wages based on market conditions.

Program and personnel changes are proposed to take place in child support, management information systems (MIS), the district attorney’s office, and the Human Services Department and clerk of courts office.

“Child support will be having someone retire and they will not be filling that position,” Wehmeier said. “So that saves us almost \$25,000. We also have a legal secretary position that we have not filled with the district attorney, so they will be unfunding that position as well, and that’s an overall savings to the county of almost \$61,000.”

He said that the Human Service Department would add three comprehensive community services positions, make the part-time family development position full time and add deputy director duties.

“We’ve had several moving pieces with the clerk of courts over the last year,” Wehmeier said. “There were really no costs changes, just title changes.”

Within MIS, there was the elimination of a part-time senior systems analyst position.

Positions continue to be reviewed at Jefferson County Fair Park, the register of deeds office, Health Department and University of Wisconsin-Extension.

“Looking ahead, we want to maintain a low deductible for health insurance,” Wehmeier said. “The county will pay 95 percent for non-sworn personnel and 93 percent for sworn personnel. We also want to maintain our flex spending contributions.”

Wehmeier also suggested a 1-percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), maintaining the Step Program and looking at bonuses such as performance and retention bonuses, going forward.

“We continue to maintain positive trends and projections for revenues,” Wehmeier said. “Sales tax is up and ... we were able to capture another \$200,000. State shared revenue and utility taxes are being maintained.”

Updated data resulted in net new construction of approximately \$215,938.

A change in investment strategy, which included moving to a new investment adviser and a change of investment policy — both approved by the county board last week — will allow returning funds to jump from roughly \$200,000 to the \$300,000 to \$350,000 range.

“County funds are being invested in similar ways, but in a different manner,” Wehmeier explained.

“They’re all in government securities and things like that. It’s just a little bit different idea of what we can invest in that will garner greater dividends back to the county.”

Also on Monday were the budget hearings for MIS, the county board of supervisors, county clerk and the register of deeds. All four recommended budgets were approved by the Finance Committee.

The MIS department also is looking to redo the Jefferson County webpage, according to John Rageth, systems and applications manager of the MIS department.

The MIS department's 2016 recommended budget would provide \$1,391,484 in charges to departments, a \$20,756 decrease from 2015. There would be approximately \$160,000 in total capital items.

"A lot of what's in our budget is replacement of existing equipment," Roland Welsh, manager of the MIS department, said.

"Each time we go to replace something, we're looking at Cloud options. Next year is not going to be a tough year in terms of replacement."

The Jefferson County Board of Supervisors' proposed budget provides \$392,202 in tax levy, a \$6,886 decrease from last year.

"What we basically did was reduce per-diem costs," Jim Schroeder, county board chairperson, said. "We also reduced various other operating costs."

The county clerk's budget amounts to \$226,974 in the tax levy. That is a \$38,887 increase from last year, mainly due to the increase in elections during 2016.

The register of deeds' 2016 budget would provide \$181,459 in tax levy, a \$39,880 decrease from 2015. The primary reasons for this decrease was the use of \$77,562 of redaction fees to offset a portion of salaries in 2015 and a reduction in staffing in 2016.

The next three departmental budget hearings will take place at 8:30 a.m. on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

The final budget recommendation will be presented by the Finance Committee to the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors next week.