

Sheriff's budget goes up

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, September 17, 2015 9:19 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office is seeking \$553,647 more than last year due to several one-time expenses in the coming year.

As budget hearings continued Wednesday, the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Finance Committee approved the Sheriff's Office's budget, advancing it to the full county board of supervisors.

The Finance Committee is recommending a countywide tax levy of \$26,721,957. The proposed levy represents an increase of \$26,510,891 this year.

The proposed overall 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.

The Sheriff's Office, which makes up the largest portion of the tax levy with a requested \$12,231,125, exceeded its tax levy goal due to several one-time major operating purchases. The budget request represents an increase of \$553,647 from 2015.

"These major operating items are more one-time expenditures more than anything," County Administrator Ben Wehmeier told the Finance Committee during budget hearings Wednesday. "They're not annual appropriations, but they don't fit the definition of capital items. So the items are in their operational budget, which put them over their levy goal, but it's more so because these one-time purchases are needed."

Approximately \$82,063 is expected to be spent on major operating items, including squad car MDC (mobile digital communicator) laptops, replacement of deputy and squad radios (\$18,100), replacement of Tasers (\$5,000), SWAT tactical vests (\$7,000) and MSA breathing units (\$9,963).

An expected \$42,000 will go toward the MDC laptops due to the state mandating that a system called MOC be installed into all squad cars throughout Wisconsin.

"It gives you the interoperability where you're actually able to see where all the law enforcement cars are in the state or your area," Chief Deputy Jeffrey Parker said. "It opens up the ability for us to be able to see where we're at during major incidents. It's a very good tool, but it requires us to buy a large amount of data to keep the system up and running. Change came with a cost, so to speak."

Parker explained that the brand of Tasers the department currently has no longer is being supported.

“They won’t even repair them, so I have to gradually switch over to a different model of Tasers to make us compliant with use-of-force situations,” Parker said. “Breathing apparatuses — there’s certain OSHA requirements that have been put into affect that require us to have certain kinds of equipment on hand for those kinds of emergencies.”

Included in the Sheriff’s Office tax levy is \$250,839 for capital items in 2016. Another \$134,961 from the fund balance will be used to pay for additional capital items.

The capital items paid for by tax levy funds are six patrol SUVs and an unmarked squad car, all of which need to be replaced. Approximately \$231,800 will go toward the patrol SUVs and \$19,039 will help pay for the unmarked squad car.

“We see the purchase of another large group of vehicles for the fleet in 2016,” Parker said. “In 2017, we should not be exchanging out any of our patrol fleet vehicles.”

Capital items paid for via the fund balance include Tahoe propane systems, an upgrade to the Wifi in the Sheriff’s Office, a patrol K-9, state interface for the MDC and dispatch, remodeling of the training facility, Coban Server Unit for squad camera and a replacement vehicle for drug forfeiture.

“You see \$48,000 being earmarked toward the propane system for those squad vehicles,” Parker said. “What we’re hoping is that Chevy does not go ahead and make any major modifications in the engines and if that does take place, that we’ll be able to use the propane system on current year models. They made changes on the 2015 vehicle models and required us to buy new propane systems.”

Currently, the Sheriff’s Office has no Wifi capabilities. The courthouse, which is connected to the Sheriff’s Office, has Wifi, but that signal ends at the courtrooms and does not reach into the Sheriff’s Office.

“By putting it into our facility, it’s going to increase our efficiency,” Parker said.

“For an example, we have the electronic charting system that the jail nurses use,” the chief deputy continued. “Once Wifi is available in the Sheriff’s Office, it will open up a window that will allow us to use certain technologies that we’re currently not using because we can’t without the Wifi.”

During 2015, Parker explained, the Sheriff’s Office was understaffed by four or five people due to continuous personnel turnover.

“This budget reflects, hopefully, being able to fill all open positions and being able to move forward in that direction with personnel,” Parker said.

Another department that has had staffing problems is the Highway Department, which has had two to five of the 57 full-time positions vacant for the last two years.

“It’s been really starting to challenge our department more and more,” Highway Commissioner Bill Kern said. “We’ve had a lot of turnover. The hiring process takes a while — trying to find qualified people and offering them enough money for them to actually come — but we’re getting closer to full staffing now.”

The Highway Department budget requires a tax levy of \$5,808,537, an increase of \$64,928 from 2015. An estimated \$3,946,226 will go toward funding road projects such as highway paving, road rehab and construction. Another \$1,298,000 from grants, the fund balance and carry-over funds from 2015, will fund those projects.

The funding will allow the county to pave approximately 10.5 miles of county highway in 2016, which falls short of the goal set by the Highway Department to pave 12 to 13 miles per year.

“If we want to turn over more miles, it’s going to cost more money,” Kern said. “Asphalt pavements last about 20 years. Sometimes you get by a little longer on one, sometimes they wear out faster. When you get to that point, it’s a variety of what you have to do to repair it.”

The Highway Department also expects roughly \$1,182,690 to be spent on new equipment. Equipment includes, but is not limited to, four single axle plow trucks, a motor grader, four tractors/mowers, four L90 loaders and a track excavator.

The Highway Department budget was advanced.

The Finance Committee also heard budget reports from the Land and Water Conservation Department, the county administrator, county treasurer, University of Wisconsin-Extension, clerk of courts and the Economic Development Department. All proposed budgets were approved by the Finance Committee.

The Land and Water Conservation Department requested \$236,468 in tax levy. That is an increase of \$5,354 from last year.

“The slight increase that is in here is basically staff costs,” Mark Watkins, Land and Water Conservation department head, said.

A tax levy amount of \$265,029 was requested for the County Administrator’s 2016 budget. That includes the 2016 budget for the Treatment Court which is funded by federal and state grants. The total budget is an increase of \$8,622 from 2015.

The 2016 treasurer budget provides \$821,664 in tax levy savings, which is a \$109,549 increase from the 2015 budget due to interest on investments and taxes.

UW-Extension requested a budget of \$317,552, which is an increase of \$3,078 from 2015. The clerk of courts requested a budget of \$1,561,913 in tax levy, a decrease of \$4,879 from last year.

The Economic Development Department's 2016 tax levy is budgeted on the county board budget and includes \$28,000 for the Railroad Consortium. Half of that will come from the departments budget and the other half will come from the county board budget.

Jefferson County departmental budget hearings will continue at 8:30 a.m. today and Friday.