

County budget likely to include more cuts
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By Stacy D. Stumbo of the Daily Courier
Community

Josephine County commissioners are preparing to adopt a financial plan that will likely include additional personnel cuts in the coming fiscal year

A public hearing on the county's proposed budget for 2013-14 is set for Wednesday at 9 a.m. in Anne Basker Auditorium, 604 N.W. Sixth St., Grants Pass.

In the past year, the county has experienced drastic reductions in criminal justice services because of cutbacks and layoffs.

"The problem with this budget is that there is no money. I think it's beginning to sink in to the community that this is really what we're looking at. This is all the money we have," Commissioner Keith Heck said.

The overall proposed budget is \$67 million, down from \$74 million in 2012-13. However, most of the budget is made up of "pass-through" money from the state and federal governments that must be used for specific purposes, and cannot be redirected by county officials.

When logging on public land — the county's primary revenue source — significantly dropped two decades ago, the federal government provided a straight subsidy to offset the loss. Now, the government has discontinued that funding and commissioners have struggled to find a way to continue to provide services.

Finance Controller Arthur O'Hare said the proposed combined general fund and public safety fund budget is \$15.1 million, up from \$14.5 million in 2012-13. The increase is the result of the final federal payment.

Commissioners have discretionary use of only \$7.8 million in the budget, O'Hare said. That money is a combination of property taxes, nondedicated fees and carryover money. Following the recent failure of Measure 17.49 — a three-year tax that would have generated about \$9.1 million annually for the criminal justice system — the county Budget Committee adopted a budget that gave the Sheriff's Office an additional \$312,200 from the general fund to keep up to 100 jail beds open and \$54,000 to the District Attorney's Office to pay for an additional part-time prosecutor.

Despite a lack of revenue, the committee aimed to maintain most departments at their current service levels through June 30, 2014.

"There will still be some layoffs." Heck said. "It's not clear how many at this point, but it won't be 70, or a major layoff like that. The county's not going to fold up, but it's going to be tough."

According to finance reports, the proposed Sheriff's Office budget is \$5.5 million, down from about \$12 million just two years ago. The District Attorney's Office will receive \$1.7 million and the Juvenile Justice Department will get \$947,000. Juvenile Justice's detention center and shelter on Fourth and F streets will remain closed and the county will continue to rent beds in the Jackson County Juvenile Detention Center in Medford to house young offenders.

On Thursday, the county deposited a check for \$548,000 from the federal Payments in Lieu of Taxes program, which reimburses state and local governments for federally owned property. Between the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service and other federal agencies, the government owns about two-thirds of the land in Josephine County.

Heck said he is going to propose that the PILT money be earmarked to pay for two deputies to respond to crisis calls. The deputies would not perform patrols, but would answer calls for help.