

Deschutes County Approves \$253 Million Budget

by K_Guice

A \$253 million budget has been unanimously adopted by the Deschutes County commissioner's office for 2006-2007.

The budget, passed on June 28, allows for additional staff, including three more sheriff's deputies. However, this year's budget officer, Commissioner Mike Daly pointed out that growing demands in the county are still likely to outpace resources due to a lack of state funding.

Commissioner Mike Daly, Commissioner Bev Clarno, Board Chair and Commissioner Dennis Luke The recommended budget is up \$22.7 million from this year, which is fueled by a 9.2 percent growth increase. "The county increased property values by 1.2 billion," said Board Chair and Commissioner Dennis Luke. "That means an approximate 1 million dollar increase to the general fund."

To put that into a little perspective, Luke said the city of Redmond just hit 1 billion dollars in total value two years ago. "While it brings in income, it also brings in potential problems," he said. More growth means more people, which means more services the county has to provide.

Currently Deschutes County provides for the safety, security and health of over 143,000 citizens through public safety, human services, adult parole & probation, juvenile justice and many other public services.

The growth comes at a time when the state is cutting back on health, mental health, parole and probation. "The sheriff's department receives funds from the state under Senate Bill 1145 for the housing of state prisoners in the county and they (the state) are cutting back on that funding."

That means the county has to come up with the money to support where the state has left off.

One place handling an influx of the county's growth is the county clerk's office. Their budget was approved to increase by nearly a third to aid in handling the records for all of the new homes, mortgages, etc.

"The county clerk consistently brings in more money than we budget," said Luke. Some of the funding for that department will be used to purchase new voting machines and ballot counters.

In addition, the budget does allow for the county's parole and probation department to bring back a probation officer to oversee sex offenders convicted of misdemeanors.

"The state pays for the monitoring of felony offenders," said Luke. However, the county is required to provide supervision for misdemeanor cases. "Those are typically people who have exposed themselves or say a 19-year-old male who is dating a 17-year-old female and the guy gets arrested," he said

Earlier in the year, the department had been forced to release dozens of offenders from its caseload due to the lack of officers available to supervise the cases.

Five new sheriff office employees, including three patrol officers and one investigator have been approved. Luke said the new hires will be covered with money from the current, three-year operating levy.

According to Daly the funding is a result of "savings accumulated during the first two years of the levy by keeping employee levels flat and reducing discretionary spending."

"Back in the mid-80s the sheriff's office was put on a levy so they aren't part of the county general fund," he said. "Every three years the voters have to go out and approve their levy."

In November, the sheriff will be looking for a permanent tax base. All counties and cities have a permanent tax base so you don't have to keep going out and getting it approved. It gives them some assurance so they can do long-range planning.

That was passed in May, but it did not get the 50 percent majority it needed, so it will go back out to the voters again in November. The current levy expires June 30, 2007.

Other items that passed include the creation of one full-time and one part-time health department positions. One to certify applicants for the WIC (Women Infants Children) and a public health nurse in the program for communicable disease and disaster preparedness. "This position is supposed to set up the coordination between hospitals, emergency systems, etc.," said Luke.

The budget also will help the Commission on Children and Families develop its first strategic plan. "They receive money and distribute it out to non-profits in the area," Luke said. "They're basically a pass through and then do auditing of the non-profits to make sure the money is being spent correctly."

A \$75,000 loan is budgeted to the Black Butte Ranch County Service District. The district, which levies money for road and police services for Black Butte Ranch, anticipated a cash flow shortfall at the start of the 2006-2007 budget year.

“It is a place holder in case they need the money,” Luke said. “We are not giving them money; it is a loan only if they come up short for construction, etc.”

Commissioner Bev Clarno voted for the budget but said the county should change its system so the county administrator serves as the person charged with drafting the budget. Under the current system, a county commissioner holds the rotating budget officer post for one year at a time.

“Bev felt strongly that we just passed an ordinance that reinforced the powers of the administrator and she feels the city administrator should be able to engineer the county budget,” said Anna Johnson, the public communications coordinator for Deschutes County.

Luke said the ordinance was changed last year and that the county administrator does have the responsibility.

However, Luke says that it is an opportunity for a commissioner to learn the budget and see how it works. “I’ve been budget officer three times in about seven years and you get a good understanding of all the things the county does.”

Once priorities are made, the suggestions for the budget go to a six-person committee. There are three commissioners and three citizens. An item has to get at least four of the six votes to be part of the budget.

“Bev’s concern is that it should just be the administrator,” Johnson said. Clarno was reportedly concerned that the current system gives an individual commissioner too much power to potentially advance a personal agenda.

Clarno cited a \$50,000 grant in the budget for Deschutes County Historical Society, which Daly sits on the board of.

Daly countered stating that the county's six-member budget committee voted to approve the historical society's request. In addition, Luke said it was taken out of the budget. "We have met with them personally, but we are not going to give them \$50,000," he said.

"There will be some money, but not \$50,000," Luke said. "That is difficult to do when you are having a hard time funding your probation and parole budget."

Creating the budget is a delicate balance. Luke said while there is an additional million dollars going into the fund from growth that may not always be the case. "We have tried not to inflate our budget and add personal unless we have to."

By keeping the budget conservative Luke says it helps assure that there are funds for the future needs of the county and its citizens.

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