

County closer to '11 budget

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Sullivan County Commissioners finalized their proposed county budget Friday and will pass it off to the county delegation for review beginning next week.

The commissioners' \$28.74 million budget proposes a 4.75 percent increase in the amount to be raised through taxation over the current fiscal year, which

ends June 30.

"It's a pretty lean budget," said Jeff Barrette, chairman of the Sullivan County Commission, "and given the pressures we're under, with Medicaid funding and health insurance rates for our employees, combined with the first-year payment on the bond for the (county jail) addition, I think we did pretty well."

The county will receive about \$525,000 less next year in state and federal Medicaid reimbursements, according to county officials. Health insurance costs

increased 17 percent for county employees, so commissioners have launched a comprehensive review of its insurance plans and contribution structure.

Sullivan County Administrator Greg Chanis said Friday that in reviewing salaries for next year, Sullivan County nursing home administrator Ted Purdy noticed that some retirement money had been mistakenly included in initial budget calculations for certain positions.

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"We realized that we had budgeted retirement contributions for some per diem positions at the nursing home when we do not contribute for those positions," Chanis said.

Commissioners decided Wednesday to reduce proposed salary increases for nonunion employees from 3 percent, as recommended by Chanis, to 1.5 percent, saving the county an estimated \$80,000. The changes meant the budget went from an estimated 5.2 percent increase, as reported earlier this week, to the final figure of 4.75 percent.

Unionized employees will receive 3 percent salary increases next year, as previously negotiated in their contracts with the county.

Included in the commissioners' proposed budget again this year is \$300,000 for

a central air conditioning system to be installed in the county nursing home in Unity. That expense was included in the budget last year and then cut by the Sullivan County Delegation, which is made up of all the state representatives in the county.

Barrette said that while most nursing home residents are comfortable in the summer, the building gets intolerably hot for staff on the upper floors. He said the air conditioning system "will be in every budget that I deliver to the delegation, as long as I'm a commissioner, until it gets done."

The delegation is scheduled to begin reviewing the county budget in May and will continue throughout the summer. During the delegation's review, county officials expect to find out whether the county

will receive a six-month extension in federal stimulus money that could add about \$700,000 in revenue to the budget for fiscal year 2011. If the extension materializes, the delegation could decide to use the money to offset the proposed tax increase.

Barrette said if the county receives the additional stimulus money, he would be in favor of using some of it to lower the tax rate. But, he warned, using one-time funding to pay for county operating expenses leads to unpredictability in the tax rate from year to year, as has historically been the case in Sullivan County.

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