

Barrette: No choice but to hike taxes

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Sullivan County Commissioner Jeff Barrette said the county's plan to pay off the deficit and work under a realistic budget may hit taxpayers' pocketbooks hard, but the short-term pangs will bring stability to an otherwise out of control budget.

"This budget is really hard to swallow," Barrette said. "But I don't know what else to do other than have a realistic budget."

The commissioners have proposed a \$28 million budget for fiscal 2008-2009 which reflects an increase of 32 percent on the amount to be raised by taxes.

Barrette said the budget numbers are a reflection of the county's finances.

"The budget accurately reflects where we've been over the past 18 months and the actual costs of running the county," Barrette said. "I think it would be a great disservice to not be accurate. We're desperately trying to do the right thing."

Barrette said that the major reasons for the increase in the budget are paying off one-third of a \$2.5 million deficit and budgeting for realistic expenses at the nursing home.

"The budget lives and dies with the nursing home," Barrette said. "There is a cost associated with running the nursing home."

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Barrette foresees the number of people at the nursing home, or the census, increasing over the next several years as baby-boomers begin to retire.

"We're on a firm footing now," Barrette said. "But if the census doesn't rise, we're going to have to look at closing a floor — putting pencil to paper. The doors are open for whatever we have to do."

But Barrette does not see completely closing the nursing home as an option.

"If it was closed, we would just get a bill from other nursing homes where our residents would stay," Barrette said. "Would you rather have a bill without any control?"

The current financial situation of the county could be far worse, according to Barrette.

About six months ago the county was on track to post another multi-million deficit under the current year's budget. Barrette said the commission recognized this and implemented numerous cuts to save money.

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"We have turned what could have been a \$2 million deficit into what will be under \$500,000," Barrette said.

Part of the plan for financial stability is to hire a financial manager. The auditors of the county's financials have made this recommendation for several years.

"We will have a financial manager and the job description is being written right now," Barrette said. "It's in the proposed budget and we will be looking for one after the end of the fiscal year."

With the implementation of an accurate budget, Barrette said he hopes to never have a major increase in taxes on future budgets.

"I don't think there will be another spike like this year barring any fundamental shift in funding at the federal level," Barrette said. "I don't see these types of increases as the norm or even half that. I would like to keep the budget at the rate of inflation."

Barrette said that although the budget may see a large increase this year, he still supports the construction of a new \$7.1 million rehabilitation facility for inmates.

"We cannot afford to let the infrastructure of the county go to the wayside," Barrette said. "The financial implications of the jail do not hit until fiscal year 2010. I think it's the right thing to do and it's definitely cost effective."

The county delegation will meet Monday morning at 9 at the Sugar River Technical Center in Claremont for the annual county convention to vote on a budget for the next fiscal year which begins July 1.

Barrette said he encourages the delegation to pass the commissioner's proposed budget with a few necessary amendments.

"This problem wasn't created in a year and it won't be fixed in a year," Barrette said. "It goes back three or four years and

will take three or four years to fix it. This is a plan to get our financial house in order."

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