

Council critical of county tax situation

By **KYLE JARVIS**
Staff Writer

The Claremont City Council criticized the budget situation at the county level at Wednesday night's meeting, with Mayor Deb Cutts referring to it as "troubling."

Claremont

Cutts prefaced her comments by saying she hadn't previously been aware of the seriousness of the situation.

"When I first heard about it, I thought it was a mistake," she said. "If the county passes the budget on the table, the city of Claremont's (county)tax rate will go from \$2.48 to

\$3.30, for a total share of \$2.4 million. I'm baffled, and shocked."

Ward III Councilor Jeff Goff read aloud from a prepared statement, which echoed Cutts' com-

ments.

"It has been made public that the county is projecting a deficit for this coming fiscal year of over \$300,000, added to a deficit posted last year of over \$2.5 million," he said. "Despite this significant deficit of \$3 million, the delegation feels it necessary to vote the commissioners a 1.5 percent raise. I feel it is terribly inappropriate to ask

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Claremont mayor

Sullivan County residents for a 33 percent tax increase while at the same time increasing the pay of our commissioners."

Goff's statement went on to criticize the county commissioner's "unanimous recommendation for the expenditure of \$7.1

million for a drug treatment facility and upgrades to the existing jail ... I will not deny in any respect the need for a facility or

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upgrades, but the fact is that now is not the time."

After his statement, Goff encouraged his fellow councilors to attend various upcoming county related meetings, including an Executive Finance Committee meeting of the Sullivan County delegation at 10 a.m. June 15 in Newport, and a meeting of the county commissioners June 17 in Newport.

There was also significant discussion at Wednesday night's meeting concerning the approval of a barn preservation easement for Claremont resident Clay Hawkins.

"I supported it my first year on the council, I supported it the following year, I supported it last year, and I support it this year," said Cutts.

But city assessor Ed Tinker had other suggestions, mainly that such an exemption would result in a "shift in the tax burden" that he feels "now is not the time to approve this exemption."

"I agree we need to preserve barns and historic sites," he added. "But I don't think this would be good for the city,

because there's no assistance from the state for it, and considering the economic situation now, it's just not the right time. The shift in the tax burden would be too much."

Tinker also had concerns that \$3.5 million worth of potentially qualifying properties under the exemption, could mean a flurry of applications if the council were to grant the Hawkins exemption.

But Goff wasn't buying what Tinker was selling, saying "I'm a little concerned that you're trying to discourage the council from approving an exemption that's available to our residents. Is it that you're just not prepared to do any extra work that might be involved?"

Tinker denied Goff's implications, saying he was only looking out for the taxpayers and that he had serious concerns about the cost of administering the exemption, which could include previously unnecessary site visits and evaluations.

Councilors Toby Batchelder, Kyle Messier, Keith Raymond, and Assistant Mayor Andy Austin all voiced similar con-

cerns, while Ward II Councilor Paul LaCasse said "this barn (the Hawkins' barn) in particular is rare and I hate to see these old barns being torn down."

Cutts, LaCasse, and Goff voted in favor of granting the exemption, but the motion failed.

Also from Wednesday night's meeting, the council approved amending the non-union employee classification plan, with LaCasse representing the only nay vote;

Jim Feleen of the New Community Center for Claremont Inc. gave an update to the council about the group's progress, including the upcoming launch of a Web site, as well as having assembled a team of two architectural firms and an engineering firm.

Mayor Deb Cutts started the meeting by asking for a moment of silence to remember 16-year-old Karl Collise, a Claremont resident who died in a tragic swimming accident over the weekend.

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