

WENATCHEE WORLD

Okanogan County cuts into juvenile-services program

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OKANOGAN — Four Juvenile and Family Services employees in Okanogan County, including the director, will be laid off at the end of this year to balance the county's 2011 budget, officials said.

The layoffs come one year after the department's employees agreed to a 10 percent reduction in pay and hours to save the jobs of fellow workers.

Other departments aren't losing employees, but they're not adding back any of about 15 positions lost over the past two years, either.

The county's proposed operating budget, set to be adopted Dec. 27, is about \$18.8 million. That's \$1.2 million less than this year's adjusted budget, and borrows more than \$500,000 from the county reserves and its capital improvement fund, said Nan Kallunki, the county's director of human resources. Approximately \$850,000 remains in reserves.

County Commissioner Bud Hover said sales tax revenues have continued to drop, and the ripple effect from lack of construction, higher fuel and health insurance costs and less revenue from interest on investments has plagued the county's ability to continue operating at the same level.

"I feel like we've kind of bottomed out," he said Wednesday. "In our county, we may not turn around really quickly, but if we can maintain a level of service that people can live with until things get turned around, I think we'll be OK. If things do go further into the ditch, we may be looking at more cuts next year," he added.

It's the third year in a row that Okanogan County has laid off employees, in addition to making cuts in hours and benefits.

The budget does include pay raises for elected officials, which commissioners adopted by resolution three years ago. "Once that is set, by state law, they're offered that and that's what their salary is going to be," Hover said.

Kallunki said commissioners raised salaries of all elected officials after comparing them to nine other counties, in order to make them competitive.

"We couldn't have predicted in 2007 that we'd be in the position we're in now," she said.

The three commissioners will each make \$4,970 a month, compared to the \$4,837 current monthly salary for two commissioners. The salary of the District 3 commissioner — who now makes less — will be increased to \$4,970.

Kallunki said none of the county's employees are scheduled to get cost-of-living increases this year, although bargaining is continuing with those in the Teamsters Local 760, which

represents workers in several departments, but not some of the larger ones, such as the Sheriff's Office.

"The bottom line is, we don't have the money to do a cost-of-living raise, nor do we have the justification for it, at this point," she said. Benefits are scheduled to remain the same, after medical costs were cut last year, she added.

Only the juvenile department will lose employees.

Juvenile department administrator Steven Gadd lost his job, along with two drug and alcohol counselors and one probation officer in the juvenile department, said Superior Court Judge Jack Burchard, who oversees the department. Gadd's contract expires Dec. 31. Instead of severance pay, he and other laid-off employees were given the month of December off with pay, although one of the drug and alcohol counselors worked an extra week so he could explain the changes to his juvenile clients, Burchard said.

The head of the county Juvenile Detention Center is now acting administrator of Juvenile and Family Services.

Burchard said the department lost grant funding, which, combined with county budget cuts, made it impossible to maintain the department at current levels.

"Many of the kids we deal with come from families that have problems, and many have serious drug and alcohol problems, so it's very hard to lose drug and alcohol counselors," he said.

But the state does not require counties to provide drug and alcohol counseling, and many of the juveniles can be referred instead to Okanogan Behavioral HealthCare, he said.

"The problem isn't the county budget. The problem isn't the county commissioners or an internal problem in the juvenile department. The problem is juvenile crime, and broken families, and drug and alcohol addiction," Burchard said.

"If we stay focused on what the problem is, we'll be OK."

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