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Pay raises, jail woes highlight 2014 Pierce County budget plan

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By Steve Maynard — Tacoma News Tribune

The crisis in jail funding that racked up a \$5 million shortfall is sapping Pierce County's budget this year and into 2014.

The problem will reach a critical crossroad Tuesday.

The Pierce County Council is scheduled to decide whether to lay off 16 corrections deputies as part of a \$3 million cut in the county jail's budget for 2013. County Executive Pat McCarthy recommends filling the rest of that gap with \$2 million from reserves and increased sales tax revenue.

At the same meeting, McCarthy will present her proposed budget for 2014.

It would add another \$2 million from increased property and sales tax dollars to offset the jail's shortfall for next year. Her new budget isn't expected to require laying off more corrections deputies next year as long as the jail's budget is cut this year, she said.

"We're setting the stage for a resized corrections department," McCarthy said.

That means a lower baseline corrections budget to run a smaller jail. As of mid-September, the average daily population had dropped 17 percent since January, when Tacoma shifted its misdemeanor bookings to Fife's jail for cheaper rates.

The jail's deficit outlook turned even bleaker last week. Undersheriff Eileen Bisson said the Sheriff's Department expects jail contract revenue to drop next year by \$706,000 more than previously projected.

But for now, McCarthy says she will hold to her projection of no additional layoffs needed in 2014.

McCarthy is asking the council for authority next year to review the corrections budget every month and to reduce the jail's budget, if needed, to keep it balanced. That authority currently rests with the council and Sheriff Paul Pastor.

County Council members received McCarthy's budget Monday. They'll hold hearings and approve a final spending plan in mid-November.

Despite the challenges with corrections, McCarthy said her 2014 budget is the best in her five years as executive.

The number of full-time equivalent positions would increase by eight. There are no across-the-board cuts and just three firm layoffs.

The county's 3,000 employees would receive their first cost-of-living adjustment in three years. Wages would increase 1.25 percent in January and 1.25 percent in July for an annualized increase of 1.8 percent.

McCarthy called that “a very modest increase.” The total cost for all employees: \$4.2 million.

But those mostly positive aspects of the budget continue to be overshadowed by jail cuts.

Last Tuesday, the County Council postponed deciding whether to lay off any deputies for a week so the county could explore alternatives including early retirements, part-time positions and furloughs.

Council member Connie Ladenburg, the Tacoma Democrat who suggested the delay, said the most attractive option for her is early retirements.

County staff studied that idea in the spring but determined retirement buyouts would increase costs, resulting in more reductions or reallocating current spending, said county budget and finance director Gary Robinson said. Costs would include a buyout incentive, increased retirement plan costs, and payouts for accrued vacation and a portion of sick leave.

Council Chairwoman Joyce McDonald, R-Puyallup, has been exploring the option of part-time positions. But Robinson said those also might add costs, depending on the amount paid for benefits.

Brian Blowers, president of the Corrections Deputies Guild, said benefits for part-timers would be prorated and would not increase costs.

“We’re feeling that’s the easiest (option) because we have people willing to do that now,” Blowers said.

The third proposed alternative, furloughs, is another idea that wouldn’t save money, Robinson said.

County Council members are looking at a variety of options, said Paul Bocchi, their budget analyst.

“I think they want to solve the budget problem,” Bocchi said. “But they’re concerned about people losing their jobs.”

McCarthy described her 2014 budget as stable and responsible.

“This is the culmination of all the efficiencies that we put in place during the recessionary years,” she said.

That period of budget slicing started in 2009, when the county cut 97 positions as the recession started eroding tax revenues. It escalated in 2010, when the county eliminated services at 16 parks and cut 319 more positions.

Next year’s budget gets a boost from sales tax revenue that’s projected to increase \$5.8 million over the 2013 budget. Sales tax is expected to climb due to the improved economy, including growth in commercial and residential building, Robinson said.

In planning the budget, McCarthy’s message to department leaders was: “While the economy does look to be in a better place and things are picking up, that we are not going to refill the buckets.

“We didn’t spend five years resizing county government to put ourselves in a position to build it back up without a good business case for why we would do that.”

But her 2014 budget would allow some departments to recover cut positions or gain new ones.

McCarthy’s budget also includes \$350,000 to replace aging video arraignment equipment in District Court and add the capability of video arraignments in Superior Court.

Overall, the county’s general fund budget for core government services next year would drop by 2 percent to \$270 million. That’s largely due to moving \$8.8 million for building and permitting activities into a separate, dedicated account.

Funding for public safety and legal-judicial services would make up 80 percent of the general fund. The budget and staffing for the law enforcement side of the Sheriff's Department would remain flat, McCarthy said.

The total budget would increase by nearly 7 percent to \$965 million. But that hike is primarily due to construction costs for expanding the county's sewage treatment facility in University Place, Robinson said.

Pierce County is the state's second-largest county with a population of 814,500, including 378,495 in the unincorporated area.

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IMPACTS ON COUNTY GOVERNMENT JOBS

In the 2014 budget proposed by County Executive Pat McCarthy, some departments would recover cut positions or gain new ones. Meanwhile, three full-time equivalent workers would be laid off.

New hires:

Among the positions:

- * Five positions in Planning and Land Services to handle an increase in permitting.
- * Two deputy prosecutors in the prosecutor's office.
- * A sheriff's deputy for Juvenile Court and Remann Hall.
- * One worker in communications to promote "community engagement" and provide support for the 2015 U.S. Open at Chambers Bay golf course.
- * An appraiser in the assessor-treasurer's office.

Layoffs

- * Three cooks at Remann Hall juvenile detention center due to plans to contract food service.

If you go

Who: Pierce County Council.

What: Vote on laying off 16 corrections deputies.

When: 3 p.m. Tuesday.

Where: Council Chambers, County-City Building, 930 Tacoma Ave. S., Room 1045, Tacoma.

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