

## Proposed Benton budget cuts met with stunned silence

By Drew Foster, Herald staff writer

PROSSER -- What began as a routine budget meeting Thursday ended with Benton County officials sitting in stunned silence after the commissioners said 2 percent budget cuts are being recommended nearly across the board.

The 2 percent cut, coupled with additional reductions and eliminations, would trim \$1.6 million from the 2010 budget. Commissioners will meet again at 1 p.m. Thursday to review the department heads' specific cuts and attempt to balance the 2010 budget.

One of the biggest hits was foreseen, while the other came from the blind side.

Sharon Paradis, juvenile justice center administrator, expected the commissioners to significantly cut her funding, so news that the portion of her budget funded by Benton County would be trimmed by \$375,000 was not a surprise. Between Benton and Franklin counties, the juvenile justice center's funding is being slashed by \$535,000, which will lead to the end of juvenile drug court.

On the other hand, Superior Court administrator Pat Austin was caught off guard by the commissioners' request that she eliminate the nearly \$143,000 CASA/guardian ad litem program from her budget. Elimination of CASA would lead to the layoff of two employees.

"It's very disappointing," Austin said after the morning meeting, visibly dejected.

The CASA program uses volunteers as third parties to recommend which parent gets primary custody of children in certain divorce cases. The volunteers spend time with the family and interview parents, children, relatives and others listed as references to make their decisions. The program is only used in Benton County.

"It's a very big part of the judicial process," Austin said.

The commissioners also asked Benton County District Court to cut \$75,000 for a judge pro tem. The position is vacant and the money is used if something arises that would pose a conflict of interest to the sitting judges.

Commissioner Max Benitz Jr., who recommended the 2 percent department cuts, said District Court could instead use another county's judge if needed.

Benitz also recommended allowing the county prosecutor's office to add a grant-funded position. However, he said if the grant money dries up, the position will be eliminated.

Commissioners Leo Bowman and Jim Beaver agreed with Benitz's recommendations.

"I think we should give clear direction to the elected officials," Beaver said during the 15-minute meeting. "I support the 2 percent cuts."

Bowman, who was elected to the commission in 1996, has never had to make across the board budget cuts.

"Lots of times we've had real tight budgets, but we've never had to make these type of cuts. It's sort of a sign of the times," he said.

Bowman said he wasn't sure what Benitz was going to propose Thursday morning, but described the 2 percent cuts as "more or less" what he had in mind.

Bowman said he did not, however, foresee the requested elimination of CASA. Earlier this week, he said CASA was a court program he'd like to preserve. On Thursday, he didn't oppose its elimination but later said, "No decisions are made."

All three commissioners said they'd be open to allowing Superior Court to find other areas to cut \$143,000 so CASA can continue.

"I hope they come back with that option," Bowman said.

Austin said she plans to sit down with the Superior Court judges and decide if they want to pursue that avenue. "I'm not sure we're ready to give up yet," she said.

Austin said the CASA program is one of the many tools judges use to decide which parent gets primary custody of children in divorce cases. She said the program has existed for more than 10 years and has become a valuable tool.

"The judges discussed it last week and they said it was adamantly important to have that feedback" from CASA volunteers, Austin said. "It's a huge asset."

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