

County looking at across the board cuts

By Steven Friederich

The Daily World

MONTESANO — The Grays Harbor County commissioners took the first crack at their 2013 budget Wednesday morning by looking at potential across-the-board 5 percent cuts, ignoring all requests for raises and new hires and putting mandatory, once-a-month layoffs for employees in the County Administration Building back on the table.

But even those solutions wouldn't be enough to balance the county's budget.

No decisions were made Wednesday, with each commissioner deciding to mull over the data and reconvene next week.

Commission Chairwoman Terry Willis emphasized that everything talked about was just in the preliminary stages and changes are likely. None of the current strategies prioritizes one department or their requests above another. Every department is treated the same — similar to budget cuts done over the past three or four years.

Budget Director Brenda Sherman said that even if some departments hadn't asked for more money for next year, the county would still need to find \$2 million in cuts.

The Sheriff's Office has asked to hire two corrections officers, a jail superintendent and grant raises for exempt staff, most of whom make less than if they were to drop down to a union job. Facilities wants a new custodian. The Juvenile Detention Center wants to fill a vacant probation officer's spot and hire two detention officers. The Prosecutor's Office wants a new deputy prosecutor and two staff members. The coroner, who is the lowest paid elected official, wants a raise.

The across-the-board cuts could help save the county \$1.2 million. Incorporated into the potential 5 percent cut is a one-day-per month layoff, which would save those individual departments \$112,902 and defray other cuts they may have to take.

That still leaves a gap of about \$800,000 that the commissioners would have to consider either by dipping into reserves, increasing revenue or more cuts on top of the potential 5 percent cut.

The goal is to have an operating budget of about \$24 million with reserves at about \$4.4 million — where the State Auditor recommends the county take its budget.

PUBLIC DEFENSE

One reason the extra cuts are needed is because the county's public defense budget for accused criminals who can't afford attorneys is expected to double from \$990,466 to at least \$1.8 million, if not more. If those extra costs weren't a factor, the county very well could balance its budget on just the 5 percent across-the-board cut.

Prosecutor Stew Menefee spent about 30 minutes on Wednesday talking over the details and answering questions from the commissioners on the issue, which comes about because of a new state Supreme Court ruling on caseload limits. The limits are designed to ensure attorneys have the time to devote to their clients.

The District Court judges are pursuing new caseload "weighting" policies and procedures, which could help. Such a policy would count crimes that are not very complicated as just a third of a case, but Menefee said the costs will still go up. By "weighting" cases, the limit is 300 cases per attorney, not just on the public defense contract but in each attorney's entire practice.

Menefee said that current contracts would pay attorneys about \$75,000 a year.

Commissioner Herb Welch noted that didn't seem like enough for an attorney to pay for staff, an office and to make a living wage.

Menefee agreed on that point, which is why he said the payment process would have to change, likely doubling costs.

ROAD LEVY SHIFT

On Wednesday, County Commissioner Mike Wilson said the county's road levy shift should be on the table again. That option shifted some of the property tax burden from the unincorporated areas to the areas within cities and raised \$750,000 — a little below where the county needs to get to balance its budget right now.

"It's not politically prudent to say it, but we've got to consider it," Wilson said, noting that under the current budget scenario, the road levy shift could fill the critical \$800,000 gap without more cuts.

The road levy shift has become a hot button issue in this year's county commission political campaigns. Wilson lost in the primary and will leave office at the end of the year. Willis, who

seeks re-election, and Welch have both said they won't discount the road levy shift as a possible budget solution.

Many city councils across the Harbor approved resolutions condemning the county commissioners last year for approving the property tax hike on their residents, and the councils in Cosmoplis and Hoquiam have approved resolutions within the past few weeks asking the county not to pursue the road levy shift this year.

ACROSS-THE-BOARD CUTS

If the county commissioners do pursue an across-the-board cut, it will likely open them up to more litigation by the Superior Court judges, who sued last year for just that same action.

On Wednesday, the county commissioners approved a three-page letter seeking more information on the judges' budgets — everything from the way meals are prepared at the Juvenile Detention Center to their usage of courtroom space, the duties of secretaries and employment policies.

A 5 percent cut to the judges' budgets works out to \$35,291 out of the Superior Court's proposed \$705,818 budget and \$112,275 out of the Juvenile Court's \$2.245 million budget.

Should the 5 percent cut take place, the Sheriff's Office would see a \$466,582 cut to its \$9.3 million budget and the Prosecutor's Office would need to fund \$105,126 from its \$2.1 million. That could mean personnel cuts since their budgets mainly consist of salaries and benefits.

Auditor Vern Spatz spoke against the potential once-a-month closure that would affect his office, saying he would like to make decisions on the future of his office himself. He also pointed out that just 49 employees out of the county's 391 employees are being forced to participate in the closures.

Not included in the budget is a recommended \$200,000 line item from Sherman to cover the commissioners legal expenses for the lawsuit from the judges to continue next year. Including that line item would mean drawing down reserves or more cuts. As it is, the 5 percent potential cuts to the judges adds up to \$147,566.