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Layoffs, cuts proposed in new plan

Budget + (City - County)

With tax revenues dwindling, 140 county employees could lose their jobs

By KURTIS ALEXANDER

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Months of preemptive cost-cutting by county administrators, from hiring freezes to spending caps, has proved no match for the grim economy ahead.

The County Administrative Office on Friday released a budget proposal for next fiscal year, beginning in July, that calls for up to 140 job cuts, an average of 20 percent less funding for county departments like public works and probation and a 20 percent cut to nonprofits providing "safety-net" services for the elderly and poor.

"We started on this budget in November, and we

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COUNTY CUTS

The county's \$367 million budget proposed for next fiscal year includes a number of reductions to close a \$25 million deficit.

- Elimination of 212 positions, about two-thirds of which are filled
- An average 20 percent cut for every county department, like public works, parks and probation
- Mandatory 156-hour furloughs for upper and middle management
- Implementation of a voluntary time-off program
- 20 percent cuts to contracts with dozens of nonprofits that provide county services

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were controlling hiring before that. But it's been a bad year," said Pat Busch, assistant administrative officer.

The weak real estate market and the overall slowdown in the economy will continue to squeeze property and other tax revenues, Busch anticipates, which means the county has no choice but to scale back.

The proposed budget includes no new funding for infrastructure, like road construction or technology improvements. The budget entails major cuts at Juvenile Hall, including elimination of a once promising alternatives-to-incarceration program. And, the budget barely toes the line when it comes to sheriff patrols.

"This is the worst economic climate I remember," said Busch, who has worked for the county for more than three decades.

Hit hardest is public health, whose programs not only benefit those with limited access to health care but ripple across the entire region, say health officials.

"Swine flu does not pay attention to how much income you make or your legal status, and this is true of all infectious diseases. You want a community whose health is good and has access to medical care," said Rama Khalsa, director of the county Health Services Agency.

The 530-person health agency will lose about 60 positions under the budget proposal, which translates into reductions in mental health services, substance abuse assistance and clinical care.

Khalsa said she'll try to shield programs that deal directly with patients but acknowledged that would be difficult.

The cuts proposed this week by county administrators attempt to close a \$25 million gap between the county's projected revenues and spending. The estimat-

ed \$367 million general fund budget for next year reflects a roughly 6 percent decrease over this year's budget.

The county, like a city government, is responsible for basic municipal services in the unincorporated areas, like road maintenance and planning, with the additional responsibility of providing state-mandated regional programs like the courts and health and human services.

Although no part of the roughly 2,400-person organization is immune to cuts, county administrators say they've made some funding priorities in the proposed budget, like public safety.

The Sheriff's Office will lose positions, but most will be in support areas and perhaps investigations but not front-line police work.

"This will mean that some cases will take a lot longer to be handled," said incoming Sheriff-Coroner Phil Wowak. "(But) patrols services and emergency services would be the last thing we would cut."

The proposed budget calls for an 8.6 percent reduction of the county's total work force, meaning 212 positions, though county administrators say only about two-thirds of those are currently filled.

Last month, the personnel department directed 156-hour furloughs for upper- and middle-management, as part of the ongoing cost-saving effort, presenting another significant cost savings in the proposed budget.

County administrators are currently in talks with representatives from the county's largest labor union, Service Employees International Union, and say they hope a similar furlough arrangement can be set up. Such a concession, they say, would stave off many of the proposed layoffs.

An SEIU representative on Friday had no comment on whether they would agree to take time off.

The county's proposed budget will be the subject of hearings in coming weeks and is expected to be finalized in June.