

Hearings under way on county's budget

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Santa Cruz County began budget hearings this morning with one figure looming large — a question mark.

Nearly half of the county's budget comes from the state, and some county programs hinge in large part on how much the cash-strapped state government allocates to counties.

When hearings end June 29 on the county's \$294 million budget, it's unlikely the state budget will be approved.

That means it will be at least July before it's known how much the county gets from the state. The projected figures often change from day to day.

Depending on what the state does, the county could face substantial reductions in such areas as health care, education and welfare, County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello told supervisors.

Even after the state passes its budget, there are usually "clean-up" bills aimed to help areas that have been hit hard by cuts. Last summer, State Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, sponsored legislation to prevent closure of all the branch libraries in the county.

The \$294 million budget is up \$2.7 million from last year. The

general fund, over which the county has the most control, is \$168.7 million, up \$376,000 from last year.

Ed Mazenko and Bob Suhr, members of the Alliance of Concerned Taxpayers and Involved Voters, a tax-protest group, urged supervisors to consider a lean spending approach and emphasize a results-oriented approach to running government.

Mazenko, who has analyzed county spending for the last several years, charged that "prosperity has reigned" among county workers. The workers get far better benefit packages than workers in private business, he said, and will get a 3 percent pay increase next year.

Suhr urged the county to adopt the Scotts Valley Chamber of Commerce suggestion of a "blue-ribbon" panel to review the county budget.

"You sorely need an oversight committee," Mazenko said.

The pay increase for workers next year "comes on the heels of significant losses" for workers, said Nora Hochman of the Service Employees International union, which represents two-thirds of county workers.

Last year, workers agreed to a 96-hour temporary layoff as a budget-cutting measure.