

Board signs off on \$639M budget

Budget
New hires, possible
open space district
envisioned

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SANTA CRUZ » The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday finalized the county's 2014-2015 budget, adding funds for public safety, health care and parks while further distancing itself from years of cuts impacting day-to-day public services.

The \$639 million budget includes a \$414 million general fund, a 1.7 percent increase compared to last year. While it is structurally out of balance — it relies on more than \$6 million in anticipated mid-year savings — the budget includes real signs of optimism, including new hires, new revenues and the restoration of a key department.

Furthermore, the budget was used as a vehicle to announce what could be a game-changing effort for one of Santa Cruz County's most cherished assets: the possible establishment of an open space district to raise money

for the environment.

"In light of all of the difficulties that we have, when you sit back and reflect on the accomplishments, it's pretty amazing," Chief Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello said, ticking off a list of recent accomplishments while looking forward to the upcoming year.

The next 12 months should see completion of a \$44 million Public Safety Center and the development of a converted Rountree Detention Center, a project that should add dozens of new beds to the county's overcrowded jail system.

The year also should see seven new patrol staff from the county Sheriff/Coroner's Office hit the streets, as well as three new prosecutors in the county District Attorney's Office under a last-minute deal with county budget hawks. Deputy District Attorney Jeff Rosell said the new hires will be busy working cases.

"There's all sorts of work for them to do in the DAs Office," Rosell said. "You name it. We are all overworked at this point."

BUDGET » PAGE 3

Budget

FROM PAGE 1

Under voter-approved Measure F, the county will be adding three new parks maintenance staff as well. The budget also envisions the reconstitution of a standalone Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services Department, which has been under the wing of the Public Works Department due to budget constraints. No department head has been chosen.

But potentially, bigger things are in store for county parks and open space. Tuesday, the county said it would explore establishing something similar to an open space district,

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—Supervisor John Leopold

which is in place in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

The effort would be spearheaded by Treasurer/Tax Collector Fred Keeley, who is retiring from the county at the end of the year. As a state lawmaker, Keeley helped push through \$4.6 billion on funding for parks statewide, and he has agreed to lead the open space effort without compensation.

"It's seeing what the com-

munity wants to do about increasing its capacity in the areas of parks, open space and cultural services and ocean protection," Keeley said. "Then, once we figure out what the community wants, what is the right form to make that happen?"

Supervisor John Leopold said the budget represented a turnaround for the county.

"It's the beginning of crawling out of a hole that was pretty deep," Leopold said. "We've made some really good choices, and we've tried to protect and serve the most vulnerable in our community. We prioritized public safety ... and we're beginning to have that conversation about how to rebuild a strong financial base into the future."