

Spending proposal slashes staff, services

Budget

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By **JEANENE HARLICK**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Nearly 150 county positions are cut — including 12 in the Sheriff's Office — and services to the poor, seniors and children significantly reduced in the budget delivered to county supervisors Tuesday.

The \$311 million budget, proposed by county staff with input from department heads, takes into account a \$10 million

drop in revenue stemming from repeal of the county utility tax by voters in March. It also assumes decreased taxes and other revenue from the stagnant economy; in all, the county is forecasting \$38 million less in revenue for the next fiscal year.

County supervisors will hold budget hearings in June, and are expected to approve a final budget by the July 1 start of the 2002-03 fiscal year.

The health and human services departments, which make up 31 percent of the county budget combined, were the hardest hit in the proposed budget and face staff cuts of 36 and 38 positions, respectively. The cuts would lower the array of services provided to welfare, Medi-Cal, indigent and elderly clients, according to staff. Mental health, substance abuse, public health and clinic services also would be reduced.

The county also plans to close a career center on Emeline Street.

The county Parks Department also stands to take a hit. The budget recommends phasing out several summer recreation programs and reducing hours and increasing fees at the Simpkins Swim Center in Live Oak and at other park facilities.

Plans for road repairs also are axed under the proposal, with \$1 million

instead of \$3 million going toward county roads next year. In the Planning Department, 10 positions are cut and the deputy agricultural commissioner's post eliminated.

But the proposals released Tuesday are just the tip of the iceberg; they don't take into account huge cuts proposed by the governor last week to fill an estimated \$24 billion budget hole. If

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approved, the cuts would decimate local health and social services, county staff said Tuesday.

"It is not often that I come before you and find myself speechless, but in my 20 years of work in the human services field I have never seen anything like this," said Cecilia Espinola, human services director. "These cuts would literally tear apart the safety net we have developed here in the county."

The governor's proposed cuts would reduce the human services department's budget by \$10 million and force the loss of 80 staff positions. Espinola offered these examples of the impacts the cuts could have:

■ A woman fleeing an abusive household with children in tow wouldn't be able to get emergency cash or housing;

■ An elderly person being scammed out of thousands of dollars might not be seen because short-staffed Adult Protective Services workers would have to make physi-

cal-abuse cases a priority.

Rama Khalsa, county health director, said her department would suffer a \$6 million drop in funding if the governor's cuts are approved. Those cuts include the elimination of an award-winning program that provides services to mentally ill youth and juvenile offenders. Special education would also be hurt, Khalsa said.

"The impact on children in particular would be tragic and would roll into all sorts of problems for those youth later (in life) and the criminal justice system," she said.

Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt called the governor's proposals an instance of "enormous stupidity and short-sightedness." His cuts don't make economic sense, she added, because the decrease in care to the poor, children and at-risk populations will only cost local governments and the state more money in the long run.

"The people who get hurt (by these cuts) are the people who don't have money for lobbyists. I think this is a completely disgusting state of affairs."

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Sheriff cuts positions, says front line at bare minimum

By **JASON SCHULTZ**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Sheriff Mark Tracy said Tuesday he has made deep cuts in his department to help the county absorb \$10 million in revenue lost with repeal of the utility tax, but warned if the state budget crisis forces him to make more cuts, public safety could be compromised.

Tracy said he will cut 12 positions, leave another 10 unfilled and use state grants to fund another 10 positions to free money in the county general fund.

The dozen positions to be cut include three deputies, eight correctional officers at County Jail and a records clerk.

Tracy said he did not want to make the cuts, but that all county department heads had to slice their budgets after the March passage of Measure L.

Tracy said he worked with county supervisors to find a budget that wouldn't take any patrol deputies off the streets. But he said the

department is now at bare-minimum staffing levels while the belt-tightening appears far from over.

Gov. Gray Davis needs to cut \$24 billion to balance the state budget, which won't be final until July at the earliest. Those budget cuts could include the elimination of state grants that pay for at least six county patrol deputies.

"All that's left are the front-line people out in the streets," Tracy said. "If we go any deeper it will affect our ability to respond to calls."

Tracy said if he loses the state rural crimes grant that is paying for the six deputies, he will ask the county to pick up their salaries.

"The county has a basic responsibility to provide public safety," he said. "This budget crisis places the board in a tough position. Public order is not cheap. But it's crucial and worth every penny."

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