

Budget, job cuts proposed

Budget

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SANTA CRUZ COUNTY FACING SHORTFALL EVEN BEFORE STATE REVISIONS

Public hearings begin June 17 on a budget that is \$38 million below current spending and includes eliminating 140 positions, many of which are vacant.

By David L. Beck

Mercury News

Faced with the death of its utility tax at the polls in March, and struggling with a sluggish economy that has cut into tax revenues, Santa Cruz County is proposing a budget nearly \$38 million below current levels, requiring the elimination of about 140 positions, most of them already vacant.

That, though, doesn't take

into account the cuts in state funding for local governments contained in Gov. Gray Davis' budget revision last week. When those numbers become clear, Chief Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello told the board of supervisors on Tuesday, "many adjustments will need to be made" — downward.

Supervisors will begin public hearings on the proposed

budget June 17.

Among the hardest hit departments, if the budget is approved as recommended, are:

■ Human Resources, which would lose 39 positions for services such as child welfare and social work, as well as a career center for those re-entering the job market.

■ Health Services, which will lose 36 positions involving mental health, substance abuse programs and clinics for the poor.

■ Justice, which includes the sheriff's department — 12 lost positions, none of them in

"front-line enforcement," and Probation, which loses six positions, including one in the juvenile justice system.

The district attorney's office would lose 8½ positions, including most of its consumer affairs support people. That one-half position represents a plan to eliminate the chief inspector's job as of Jan. 1, when District Attorney Kate Canlis leaves office.

The chief inspector's job has been in the public eye since January 2001, when

BUDGET-CUT BREAKDOWN

Human Resources Agency

Down \$5,420,307

Health Services

Down \$1,984,787

Sheriff

Down \$823,769

Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services

Down \$290,718

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Canlis fired its longtime occupant, Alan Johnson, and then sued the Civil Service Commission to prevent it from ordering his reinstatement.

Johnson accuses her of playing politics. Canlis did not return a phone call Tuesday seeking comment. The case is in court again July 3.

Non-profits face cuts

Not even such previously sacrosanct expenditures as the county's gifts to non-profit organizations will escape the budget knife. Last year the county gave \$4.25 million to a long list of organizations. The idea is that the contributions "leverage" funds by helping those groups do necessary tasks that the county is unwilling or unable to do itself. This year's recommendation reduces the list of donations by \$328,000.

Not all the operations affected are for the poor, the sick or the homeless, either. The county's popular Simpkins Swim Center on 17th Avenue is slated for an increase in gate fees and a reduction in days of operation.

General admission would go from \$2.50 to \$4, children and senior tickets from \$2.25 to \$3. The pool would close on Sundays and Mondays — Sundays, because that's the slowest day, according to parks and recreation fiscal officer Christina Riggs, and Monday because — well, just because it follows Sunday.

The county has been preparing for a grim budget year ever since November, when it became clear the 7 percent utility tax was going to be put to a vote. At that time Mauriello asked departments to prepare scenarios for a 12.5 percent cut across the board.

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A 12.5 percent trim

The cuts in the budget proposal presented Tuesday were not precisely 12.5 percent across the board, said county spokeswoman Dinah Phillips. But in general, the budget represents a new "baseline" roughly 12.5 percent lower. "We're just ratcheting everything down."

Not every interest group got the message right off, though. At the end of an afternoon hearing over funds for animal control and animal care, Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt admonished those who were demanding an increase, rather than a cut, to look at the context.

"It's not as if we are sitting here in a cold-hearted way," she said. "We've spent our whole day talking about what's going to happen to human beings in our county."

On the other hand, Bob Suhr, an 83-year-old retiree who has spent years studying the budget and whose knowledge of it helped fuel the forces behind Measure L, doesn't think the county needs to cut anything.

"Maybe things are tough, you've got to work a little bit harder," he said. He suggested asking county workers to contribute to their retirement.

And he said: "They talk about letting people go in order to make everybody nervous, but the last eight to nine years that I've compiled ... they've never let anybody go."

Mauriello said most of the positions she proposes to cut are vacant. Those positions would disappear July 1. Those that are currently filled would be eliminated July 26.

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