

Deal over county staffing reached

Union agreement for
furloughs will save jobs

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SANTA CRUZ — Representatives of the county's largest labor union have tentatively agreed to a contract concession that will save dozens of jobs but mean mandatory time off for roughly 1,800 employees.

Under the tentative agreement, county workers from health professionals to clerks to probation officers would surrender 5 percent of their annual pay to furloughs — about two hours a week or one day a month, beginning July 1. The terms are still being worked out and are subject to vote by union membership.

The agreement comes as the county faces a \$25 million shortfall. For county management, which plans to impose furloughs on non-union employees and the smaller employee unions, winning a deal with Service Employee Union International Local 521 is a huge breakthrough in plugging the unprecedented budget hole.

Management was not at liberty to discuss union negotiations because they are private and ongoing, but they did confirm progress Friday.

"We appreciate the efforts of SEIU during this extraordinarily difficult time," said county spokeswoman Dinah Phillips in a statement.

The union concessions had been sought for weeks, and the 5 percent pay reduction for SEIU employees, if it holds, would save

FURLOUGHS

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more than 50 full-time positions, estimates show. Before the deal, county management had called for cutting 212 positions, about a third of which are currently unfilled.

The union arrangement, however, would not offset millions of dollars of cuts that management is already planning in order to close the budget gap. On the list are slashing funds for roads, making cuts at Juvenile Hall and reducing money for dozens of nonprofits that provide services for the needy.

Union representatives said Friday that making contract concessions was the best thing they could do for members given the current economic climate.

"Some of our lowest-paid members may be looking at losing a home with even a 5 percent furlough. ... (But) we're hoping to limit the number of layoffs and save as many people as we can," said SEIU representative and county employee Lisa Giles.

Giles acknowledged that some members of the union were still at risk of losing their jobs. But, she said, the union is looking at other ways to save money and maintain positions, like allowing employees to take more time off voluntarily and urging manage-

ment to reconsider the level of funding for labor.

Already, nearly 500 of the county's roughly 2,400 employees, including elected officials and county managers, are slated for furloughs in the coming budget year, which begins July 1.

With a \$367 million general fund budget — 6 percent less than this year's — county leaders have said staffing adjustments are inevitable and acknowledged public services would suffer.

Hearings on the county's budget proposal begin June 15, and a final spending plan is expected to be adopted by the Board of Supervisors before the beginning of the new fiscal year.

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