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Health care focus of budget hearing

Talbot residents ask council to reconsider cuts to health department

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By STEVE NERY News Editor |

EASTON At the first of two public hearings on Talbot County's proposed budget Tuesday, most of the comment revolved around public transportation and health care.

The night-time session at Easton High School was expected to draw more comment on the funding of Talbot County Public Schools and also featured public hearings on the tax rate and the proposed Talbot County Community Center addition.

Finance Director Angela Lane provided the annual budget message on the proposed \$72.3 million general fund budget for fiscal year 2011. The budget has dropped each of the last three years, from an all-time high of \$86.2 million in FY08.

Revenues have dropped a startling amount since then, Lane said: income taxes by 28.5 percent, recordation taxes by 28.5 percent, transfer taxes by 23.8 percent, highway user revenues by 97.5 percent, license and permits fees by 14.1 percent, federal and state grants by 61.3 percent and interest income by 27.8 percent.

The proposed budget includes 11 layoffs, no salary increases, no transfers to the capital fund and the use of \$7 million in general fund reserves. That would leave a \$3.3 million discretionary balance as well as a \$10.8 million "rainy day fund" in case of a midyear budget crisis.

The proposed property tax rate of 43.2 cents per \$100 of assessed value is the lowest in the state by nearly 30 cents, according to Lane's presentation. The county would grant tax rate differentials of 13 cents in Easton, 11.4 cents in Oxford, 5.8 cents in Queen Anne, 12.4 cents in St. Michaels and 8.5 cents in Trappe, meaning homeowners in those towns would pay that much less in county property taxes.

The income tax rate of 2.25 percent is second lowest only to Worcester County.

Talbot County Public Schools would receive \$34.3 million in county funding, the same amount per pupil as this school year. About \$9.7 million would go to public safety, and \$7.8 million would go to general government.

During the public hearing, three women spoke about the breast cancer screening program operated by the Talbot County Health Department. After the hearing, Health Officer Kathy Foster said school health programs, cancer screening programs, the medication program and the addictions program will all be cut in the proposed budget. The health department stands to lose \$107,000 in funding from the county from FY10, affecting the most vulnerable citizens, Foster said.

Betty G. Savoy of Easton, Helen Smith of Royal Oak and Shelley States of Easton all asked the council not to cut the breast cancer screening program, as it is very important to women without insurance.

Five people, including Delmarva Community Services President and CEO Santo Grande, asked the council to support public transportation. After funding Delmarva Community Transit with \$77,000 in FY09 and \$64,000 in FY10, the county would provide \$70,000 in FY11. DCT asked for \$98,000.

"If anything, public transportation is growing, it's vital and it's very important to the people of Talbot County," Grande said. Though Caroline and Kent counties receive about the same level of services, those counties are providing \$5,000 and \$10,000 more, respectively, as well as in-kind services that Talbot does not provide, Grande said.

http://www.stardem.com/news/local_news/article_22504207-5da2-5ae0-b098-39682b27de22.html?mode=... 5/6/2010

Public transportation also helps out Easton's medical services, Grande said. DCT may have to scale back services if it can't find more money, he said.

Connie Barnett of DCT also asked for support for public transportation, as did Bill Roth of the disAbility Coalition, legally blind Denton resident Donald Christopher and Jessie Caldwell, activities coordinator at Talbot County Senior Center. Caldwell said people who can't drive are stranded in a rural area without public transportation, which she said goes together with the senior center "like bacon and eggs."

Chesapeake College President Dr. Barbara Viniar thanked the council for its support, but said the effect of level-funding is that Talbot County is now providing 10.4 percent less funding per full-time equivalent (FTE) student. With more students but not more money from the five counties or the state, the school had to raise tuition, she said.

The school also has to close some classes that require labs, Viniar said, adding "students will feel the effect."

Ted Doyle, president of the Talbot County Taxpayers Association, said the group strongly supports the county's property tax cap and its use of the full Homestead Tax Credit for primary homeowners.

Doyle said that on the whole, locking up funds for capital projects is good, but the county needs to be able to recover those funds in difficult times. The county charter does not allow for transfers out of the capital budget.

Doyle also asked the county to re-evaluate its employee benefits package and said the taxpayers association is concerned about the school budget increasing above the rate of tax revenue and inflation, calling the practice "unsustainable."

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Most Talbot layoffs will be at golf course

County employees would be replaced by seasonal workers

Posted: Wednesday, May 5, 2010 1:00 am | Updated: 6:28 am, Wed May 5, 2010.

EASTON The majority of the layoffs recently announced by the Talbot County Council will be at Hog Neck Golf Course, where seasonal employees will take over for full-time maintenance workers.

In introducing the proposed fiscal year 2011 budget on April 20, the council announced that 10 people would be laid off. The positions were not all decided on at that point, though, and the number has increased to 11, resulting in a net savings of \$406,792.

Eight of the positions will be cut from the golf course seven maintenance positions and one pro shop position, according to Assistant County Manager Jim Urbanczyk. Instead of employing full-time workers with benefits, the county will instead hire six seasonal employees to maintain the course, resulting in a savings of \$294,351.

The seasonal work will be offered first to those workers losing their jobs, Urbanczyk said. Some of them have shown interest, while others have already rejected the offer, he said.

Two clerical positions will be eliminated from the Economic Development/Tourism Department, creating a savings of \$74,689, and a maintenance position will be cut from the Talbot County Community Center, saving \$37,752.

All positions are now filled, and all the employees being laid off have been told, Urbanczyk said.

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