



Bexar County Commissioners Court

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Proposed county budget maintains current tax rate

County Manager David Smith on Tuesday presented a budget proposal that maintains the current property tax rate while increasing funding for public safety, the justice system, roads and employee pay and benefits. The \$1.69 billion proposed budget includes operating funds of \$582 million, capital project funding of \$700 million, debt service funding at \$133.5 million and contingencies and reserves of \$272 million.

“The need always outstrips the means or availability of funds,” Commissioner Paul Elizondo said. “But I think that you’ve given us a good guiding document, a good starting point to begin our budget process.”

The proposed tax rate of \$0.3145 per \$100 valuation is lower than the rollback rate of \$.33740 and higher than the effective tax rate of \$0.288232 per \$100 valuation. The recommended tax rate, along with the senior citizen tax freeze and \$50,000 veterans’ homestead exemption, results in a \$103.4 million tax savings for County taxpayers in the next fiscal year.

Commissioner Kevin Wolff told staff he would like to consider lowering the tax rate again in the new fiscal year to offset homeowners’ increased property valuations.

The proposed budget includes \$2.6 million for enhancements to public safety, including two new public safety dispatch positions in the Fire Marshal’s Office as well as five new dispatchers in the Sheriff’s Office to help reduce the time to answer emergency and nonemergency calls. The enhancements also account for new radio equipment, technology and furniture for the new Regional Emergency Operations Center being constructed by the Bexar Metro 9-1-1 Network District. That center is expected to open in the new fiscal year. Funding of \$634,000 is proposed to finish the in-car video project for the Sheriff’s vehicle fleet. Once the final phase is complete all Sheriff’s vehicles will have digital recording capability.

Funding for the Criminal District Attorney’s Office includes \$2.2 million in program enhancements to address criminal and civil cases associated with child abuse and neglect, and to add staff at all levels that will help criminal cases move more quickly through the justice

system. Earlier this year Commissioners Court approved funding for program changes to address an increase in the number of incarcerated felons awaiting trial. The budget proposal includes full-year funding for these program changes as they have proven to reduce the average daily jail population by more than 400 inmates.

Smith is recommending new funding for roads in the amount of \$31 million to include projects on Borgfeld, Fischer, Old Corpus Christi, Grosenbacher, Evans and Donop roads, among others. The amount also includes \$2 million for traffic safety improvements, \$1 million for drainage improvements and \$1.5 million for road rehabilitation improvements.

“As public servants, we’ve made a pledge to our constituents,” Commissioner Sergio “Chico” Rodriguez said. “With the recommendations proposed today, we’ll be able to step up our commitment by enhancing our response during times of emergency, put shovels in the ground for expanded roadways and finish up our flood control program.”

Though a 6 percent increase in health care claims is projected for active employees and a 10 percent increase is expected in retiree health care, the proposed budget absorbs the anticipated costs resulting in no impact to out-of-pocket expenses to employees. At the same time, the budget includes an increase in the County’s minimum wage from \$11.66 per hour to \$13 per hour. Employees on the non-exempt pay table who are not affected by that increase are proposed to get a 3 percent cost of living adjustment. A performance pay program for exempt and executive employees would be effective in April 2016, with the amount of the salary increase dependent on the individual employee’s performance.

This spring Bexar County received an upgraded long term debt rating from Standard & Poor’s Rating Services, giving the County a triple-A rating from all three major rating services. The rating services credited the County’s strong financial position and healthy cash reserve balance as significant factors. To further strengthen the County’s financial position, Smith is proposing a “pay as you go” funding strategy for desktop technology and vehicle replacements, as well as minor building maintenance. He also proposed finishing the County’s \$500 million regional flood control program with \$57 million in cash on hand from the Flood Control tax revenue. Both strategies will negate the need to issue bonds to pay for the projects, as has been done in the past.

Commissioners Court will have the first public hearing on the tax rate and a budget work session on Aug. 25 with the second tax rate hearing on Aug. 28. A public hearing on the budget proposal will be on Sept. 1 before the Court makes any final changes and adopts the budget and property tax rate.

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