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Jobs, programs are proposed Ottawa County cuts for 2010 budget

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Ottawa County, MI — Higher fees, fewer jobs and a cash infusion from the general fund will balance Ottawa County's 2010 budget, which faces a projected $3.6 million shortfall, based on a combination of rising costs and falling revenue.

The commissioners did not vote on the matter during a Tuesday work session devoted to Fiscal Services Director June Hagan's overview.

She offered commissioners six scenarios. Because they didn't receive the report until the meeting started, Hagan verbally reviewed the choices and answered commissioners' questions.

When she said employee's tuition assistance would be cut, Commissioners Matt Hehl and Joyce Kortman wanted to know if current students would be affected and whether the change was permanent. Hagan said the cut would start Jan. 1 and that none of the 40 or so county employees taking approved classes this semester would lose funding.

After reviewing a series of options for cutting planned 2 percent pay increases by 1 percent for non-union employees, and asking unions to renegotiate wages, Commissioner Bob Karsten said he opposed treating employees' wages differently; Kortman agreed.

By the numbers

Key cuts proposed for Ottawa County's 2010 budget:
- $298,370: Parks and Recreation land purchases
- $153,000: Two jobs from the unplanned pregnancy program
- $100,000: Michigan State University Extension services
- $98,000: County sponsored alcohol education, awareness, server training and public safety program
- $30,000: County health department's chronic disease prevention program
- $27,000: Savings from eliminating the Gypsy Moth reduction program
- $5,000: Combined annual dues for Grand Haven and Holland chambers of commerce

Commissioner Phil Kuyers asked if courts showed fewer cuts. Hagan said the county court budget is lower than 2008 levels.

Hagan also recommended a $1,000 cap for the county's share of retirement plans for unclassified employees. She advised cutting six custodian jobs dedicated to the Fillmore Complex and the Grand Haven Courthouse.

The county could increase real estate evaluation fees and gain $38,500, Hagan said, and as much as $100,000 if other fees are raised.

The remaining budget gap would be filled by a one-time infusion of $2 million from the general fund, jail pay phones, building rent and the stabilization fund.

It's a short term solution, Hagan said, predicting a continued increase in costs and decrease in revenue.

Spring Lake resident Robert Melamed, a records processing specialist in the county clerk's office, used public hearing time to ask commissioners to consider buyouts rather than layoffs, to preserve employee benefits and avoid asking workers to take unpaid days off. Commissioner Dennis Swartout said he did not want to cut employee pay. He and Karsten suggested the county explore the option of an independent health insurance company, rather than the county's current self-insurance plan.

In the meantime, Hagan said, county employees can expect to pay higher health insurance premiums, and between $25 and $50 for prescriptions.

In other business, the commissioners unanimously agreed to :
- Designate all of Ottawa County as an economic development recovery zone, paving the way for cities, townships and other communities to apply for permission to sell federally subsidized bonds.
- Nominate Neil MacDonald to the Timberland Resource Conservation and Development Area Council.

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