

At long last, county budget picture is brighter

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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WOODLAND — Yolo County supervisors gave final approval Tuesday to a 2014-15 budget featuring \$319 million in total expenditures with increased property tax revenue going largely to bulk up the general fund reserve, pay off debt and begin long-deferred road maintenance.

Supervisors had approved a recommended spending plan in June and unanimously approved a final budget this week.

Thanks in part to \$1.1 million in additional revenue, the new spending plan also includes five additional correctional officers who are expected to reduce the amount of overtime currently being paid by the Sheriff's Department.

And with the gradual turnaround in the economy improving the county's fortunes, supervisors voted to address a number of concerns that have gone largely ignored in recent years due to the fact there was simply no money to do so. That includes the county's largest unfunded liability — \$305 million for road maintenance.

Prior to the recession, the county had a road maintenance contingency fund of \$3 million, but beginning in 2008, those funds were gradually depleted. On Tuesday, supervisors voted to begin rebuilding that fund, placing \$750,000 back into the account, acknowledging as they did that it is a drop in the bucket given the size of the liability.

“(It’s) a pittance compared to what’s needed,” said Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento.

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis suggested that if money is left over in other contingency accounts, that it be put toward the roads as well, something Villegas agreed with.

“It’s a huge priority,” he said. “The roads are falling apart.”

County Administrator Patrick Blacklock said he would return to the board with recommendations on how best to use those funds.

During June budget discussions, Blacklock said the county also is working with cities on a capital improvement plan, the first step of which is to identify regional road needs. Once

identified, actually paying for maintenance will require a financing plan, possibly in the form of a regional sales tax.

The budget approved Tuesday also allocated \$2 million to the county's Capital Improvement Plan fund, which, like the road maintenance fund, had been depleted during the recession to help balance the budget.

Also getting a boost Tuesday was the general fund's reserve, which was increased by \$1 million to \$7.3 million, bringing it up to 5.6 percent of the general fund, the minimum recommended reserve level. That remains significantly lower than the pre-recession reserve of \$17 million.

And the county also made a dent in its debt Tuesday.

Back in 2010, the Board of Supervisors approved a \$10.5 million loan from the Central Landfill Closure Fund to cover general fund deficits for public safety (\$2.5 million) and mental health (\$8 million).

Payments made in the budget approved Tuesday will bring the public safety loan balance down to \$850,000 and the mental health loan down to \$3 million — the latter of which also benefited from a change in accounting practices.

Two new funding requests before the board Tuesday netted mixed results.

YoloArts requested additional funds for expanded services — \$120,000 per year for the next three years — but had to settle for \$48,700 for next year when it became clear there was not enough support among supervisors to fund the full request.

The \$48,700 came in a motion by Provenza, who noted that the funds would support and promote farm to fork, local agriculture, arts education, economic development and local business.

“This is a small price to pay for a program that has historically brought in many more dollars to our county in private, state and federal grants than we have ever spent on the program,” Provenza said after the meeting.

Provenza, Villegas and Supervisor Duane Chamberlain of the rural 5th District voted in favor of the allocation while Supervisors Don Saylor of Davis and Matt Rexroad of Woodland voted against it.

Chamberlain said he would have voted to give YoloArts the full amount, while Saylor and Rexroad opposed any additional funding.

Rexroad also objected to the process of individual organizations coming forward to request funding “at every meeting” with many of those requests being approved.

“I don’t think any of this is truly being analyzed,” Rexroad said. “We’re getting nickel-and-dimed to death going forward. It’s not a good process.”

But supervisors on Tuesday did vote unanimously to allocate \$62,000 toward the creation of a Yolo County Children’s Movement to help guide future policy and budget decisions that affect children — a request that came during their last meeting.

All in all, supervisors expressed confidence that the budget approved this week will take the county in right direction.

“Overall today there’s a number of things that are awesome in terms of what we’ve been able to do,” Rexroad said. “In terms of the (added Sheriff’s Department positions), overtime has been a problem every year and next year I hope we’re not (dealing with that).

“We borrowed \$10 million from our landfill and we’re paying off half of our remaining balance,” he said, adding, “I’m most excited about that.”

Provenza also commended the loan repayment and called the budget “very fiscally responsible ... and consistent with where we want to go.”

“I think we’re appropriately cautious this year,” Saylor added.

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