

# Supervisors approve county budget amid fiscal uncertainties

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy** September 30, 2016

WOODLAND — Yolo County supervisors on Tuesday approved an adopted budget for 2016-17 that does not include funding for any new positions beyond those approved by the board at its June budget hearing.

The board generally considers additional departmental funding requests before approving the final budget in the fall, but a conservative approach was recommended by County Administrator Patrick Blacklock due to what he called economic “uncertainties.”

“We’re beginning to recommend gently applying the fiscal brakes,” Blacklock told supervisors Tuesday. “There are some uncertainties on the horizon we are watching. They may be anomalies or they may be the beginning of a trend, but we’re watching them closely.”

Those uncertainties include the state missing revenue targets in recent months, something Blacklock called “a warning sign for us.” Additionally, he said, “our own revenue from property taxes and fund balances was less than we had hoped for and so we have some warning signs even in our own local numbers that cause us to take pause.”

According to county staff, the economic outlook remains mixed, with job growth remaining fairly strong, but overall economic growth weak.

Gross domestic product increased by 1.1 percent in the second quarter of 2016, following just 0.8 percent growth in the first quarter, according to the staff report.

Meanwhile, the Institute of Supply Management’s Manufacturing Index, which is a widely used gauge of economic activities, dipped in August, signifying contraction.

“While this is not necessarily indicative of an economic downturn,” the staff report said, “it is certainly a concerning trend.”

Thus, the adopted budget did not include funding for any new positions beyond those previously approved by the board in the \$373 million recommended budget passed in June. Among the staffing requests not approved were positions requested by the assessor, county counsel, public defender, financial services and the sheriff.

One department that may yet see additional staffing is child welfare services, depending on the outcome of the board’s evaluation and assessment of that agency.

“One of the issues that’s been raised has been whether or not we have sufficient resources in child welfare services to protect children,” said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis.

“I don’t want to go through a year when we don’t have adequate resources, particularly because in the recent trial, a lack of resources was raised as an issue in terms of protecting the child who died,” said Provenza, referring to the homicide trial of Samantha Green.

Green was convicted of second-degree murder earlier this month in the death of her 19-day-old son, Justice. High on methamphetamine, Green had taken baby Justice down into the Ridge Cut Slough in Knights Landing during a cold winter night in 2015 and remained with him there until he died of exposure.

Both baby Justice and his mother had tested positive for methamphetamine following his birth and both Green and her former fiancé Frank Rees had a long history of meth use. But drug abuse by Green and Rees alone didn’t warrant Justice’s removal from their custody, social worker Valerie Zeller testified, and he was released to them following their pledges to remain drug-free, undergo random drug screening and live with Rees’ parents.

However, no screenings were conducted and Green admitted in court to getting high prior to Justice’s death.

In her court testimony, Zeller said she did not know why no screenings were conducted, but described an overwhelming agency caseload and added that, “We do end up prioritizing the most fragile or dangerous situations.”

Provenza said every year during budget hearings he has asked if there are sufficient resources to protect children, “and in the past the answer had been, ‘Yes.’ It sounds like it’s ‘Maybe’ now, but I don’t want to let another year go by where we’re not allocating sufficient resources even if we have to (cut elsewhere).”

Karen Larsen, who replaced Joan Planell as director of health and human services earlier this year, replied that “we will know more when we get to the end of October.”

That’s when the board will conclude a series of workshops on child welfare services and decide what, if any, changes need to be made.

“It’s a really hard question for me to answer today until I know what our action plan looks like moving forward,” Larsen said.

At that point, Blacklock said, the board can choose to make changes.

“At the end of October we’ll emerge with some sort of action plan around child welfare services that may very well include FTEs or positions or something like that and if it does, the board has the ability to ... adjust the budget,” Blacklock said.

The approved budget also includes a health and human services contingency fund, he added, “so that does give us some options in the middle of the fiscal year. We’re well positioned to make any adjustments necessary based on that action plan.”

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