

PUBLIC EMPLOYEES ANXIOUS IN ORANGE

Orange County Officials Struggling With Difficult Budget Choices

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BY ROBIN KNEPPER

A difficult budget situation in Orange County has put government jobs and services in serious jeopardy, nerves on edge and emotions close to the surface.

Schools Superintendent Bob Grimesey choked up at a School Board work session last week when discussing the need to find alternative funding sources for school athletic programs.

And while he will ask that the School Board tomorrow night adopt what he calls a "budget reduction plan" that could result in the loss of 81.5 jobs, an across-the-board salary cut, no replacement school buses and no funding from the state for technology purchases, he has said he will do so "with a broken heart."

It will be May 5, after learning of the state and local funding for the school system, before the School Board adopts its actual budget.

Grimesey already knows the state will decrease its funding for the school system by \$2.2 million and is likely to cut more. He estimates that local funding will be down \$2.4 million and fixed and essential costs will rise by \$1.8 million.

A three-year forecast made with assumptions of revenues and expenses by county staff in November shows a shortfall in the next fiscal year of more than \$7 million. The real-estate tax rate would need to increase nearly 15 cents to offset that.

"The forecast we did was based on a set of non-specific assumptions that were not filtered through economic or political reality," said County Administrator Julie Jordan. "It will be reviewed to see what we can do in 2011."

Nevertheless, the forecast is being used by Grimesey to come up with a school spending plan. He will ask the county government for \$17.2 million, the same amount it gave the school system last year.

Grimesey will present the school system's budget to county supervisors Feb. 16, and Jordan will present her spending plan to the board a week later.

Supervisors are scheduled to approve a budget and tax rate April 13. The fiscal year begins July 1.

The prospect of job losses, salary and service cuts, and higher taxes is creating anxiety.

"This is a terrible situation, and it's tearing Orange County apart," said School Board Chairman Jerry Bledsoe.

Grimesey has held meetings with almost all school system staff to discuss the budget crunch. Parents have been invited to attend informational meetings, at which Grimesey and the principal explain the implications for the host school.

Sheriff Mark Amos reports general uneasiness in his department as he prepares a list of employees that could lose their jobs.

"Everyone's job is on the line, with the exception of our three school resource officers," he said. "That's the most important place to keep them, for safety purposes."

Although the state funds much of the commonwealth's attorney's budget, two employees are funded by the county.

"I was asked by county staff how a 30 percent cut would affect my office," Commonwealth's Attorney Diana Wheeler said. "If that happened, I would probably have to stop prosecuting misdemeanors.

"We're taking a prayerful wait-and-see attitude," she added. "I'm hopeful the county won't lose any people, but they may have to take pay cuts."

County Administrator Jordan will not talk about staff cuts right now, but she is aware that county employees are nervous about their future.

"Everything has changed at the state level," she said in an interview last week. "The budget process is not as straightforward a process as in previous years.

"We're trying to do the best we can and to figure out where we are. Everything is on the line."

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