
Our Mission: To provide quality public services in a cost-effective manner through innovation, leadership, and the cooperation of dedicated people.

County Board sets budget, levy for 2010

The Washington County Board of Commissioners set a budget and levy for 2010 designed to maintain core county services at a time when residents are increasing the demand for those services, and to minimize the tax impact for taxpayers.

The 2010 operating budget was approved by the board at \$145.3 million, or a 1.4 percent decrease from 2009. Homeowners in the county have seen the value of their homes decrease by an average of 7 percent in the past year. Against that background, the county portion of the property tax for a home valued at \$250,000 – which was valued at \$268,800 for 2009 taxes – will fall by 2.1 percent, or \$14 for the year. Even though the county's operating budget decreased slightly, the total amount levied against all properties in the county went up due to decreases in state aid and the addition of funding for the voter-approved Land and Water Legacy Program.

To fund county programs, the levy was set at \$86,783,800. The money is used for general government, community services, public works, including roads and bridges and parks, library services and payment of service. It does not include a regional rail authority levy of \$566,400, to be used for regional transportation projects, which the board voted on separately.

The County Board is maintaining a rein on tax increases at the same time that harsh economic conditions are putting high demands on county services and the county budget. Demand for services at the county Workforce Center has increased by 20 percent in 2009 over 2008, as residents seek help to re-enter the workforce. Applications for health care and ongoing food support cases have increased each month in 2009, over 2008, and the numbers continue to grow.

At the same time, the County Board will implement the Land and Water Legacy Program in 2010, an open space conservation program approved by county voters in 2006. It is designed to improve water quality; complete parkland acquisitions; protect high-quality natural areas; and help preserve the county's rural landscape by having the county acquire land or enter into land preservation agreements to permanently protect strategic lands. County voters approved a referendum in 2006 to raise money for the program, but the levy increase was delayed until enough projects were ready to warrant the sale of bonds.

Funding for that program will be provided by a 1 percent increase in the county's levy, which will raise \$850,000 for payment of the principal and interest on a \$10 million bond.

Historically, the county has been receiving less financial support for state-mandated programs.

Between 2006 and 2010, revenue from state and federal sources fell from providing more than a fourth of the county's funding, to providing less than a fifth of the money received by the county.

Because of this, more of the tax burden to fund county programs has fallen to the county property taxpayers.

County officials have been spending prudently throughout 2009, in anticipation of receiving fewer resources from the state, and in anticipation of keeping any increase in the county's tax levy to a minimum.

Through prudent budgeting, the county eliminated 27 full-time positions in the county in 2009, in anticipation of budget constraints. County departments have instituted additional innovative and cost-cutting measures to assure high-quality services, while maintaining fiscal responsibility. Some of them are:

- the county's Public Works Department is investing in energy management systems to help control heating and cooling costs for county buildings. Also, staff is being reassigned to meet service demand peaks, such as using parks employees to plow highways.
- the Accounting and Finance Department reduced its staffing in 2009 by almost 6 percent. The department is researching electronic commerce opportunities to reduce accounting costs and increase revenues.
- the Community Services Department has trimmed expenditures in Chemical Health Services by \$250,000 for the coming year. The department has been selected by the State of Minnesota as a pilot county for chemical health redesign which is intended to enhance service delivery, add needed flexibility, and utilize public dollars more efficiently.
- the county's library system will institute a new e-kiosk service in February, as an alternative way for library users to receive and return materials. Over the last year, the library system has reduced hours at four branches, and the kiosk system will allow patrons to use lockers at any time to receive and return materials, as well as allow them to search databases and check the library catalog and patron accounts at in inside computer terminal.
- the Sheriff's Office used a budget committee to create a budget that retains core and essential services that are required by statute and expected by residents, and which includes the long-

planned replacement of a Records Management System necessary to provide all public safety entities in the county with the ability to use modern technology to accomplish their collective missions.

Washington County continues to have the second lowest tax rate and spending per capita among metropolitan counties. It is a multi-year winner of the Government Finance Officers Association award program for its budget and reporting process. It also has AAA and Aa1 bond ratings from Standard & Poor's and Moody's, respectively.

The board also passed a resolution setting a property tax levy for the Washington County Housing and Redevelopment Authority at \$3,332,236, which represents a .94 percent increase over 2009. The county property tax levy represents about 25 percent of the property tax bill paid by property owners in Washington County.