

CALAVERAS BOARD TOLD TO TIGHTEN THEIR BELTS

By ***Dana M. Nichols***

June 12, 2013

Record Staff Writer

SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County faces another glum budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1, top county administrators told the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

County Administrative Officer Lori Norton said that despite some glimmers of economic hope on the national and state levels, the county's General Fund revenues will likely be about \$2 million less in the coming year, or about \$36.9 million.

The General Fund is the portion of the budget that county leaders use to pay for core services such as law enforcement and administration. The total county budget is much larger but includes restricted federal and state money, such as highway funds, as well as one-time expenditures such as those being used to complete a new \$59 million jail and sheriff administration building.

"I am going to strongly suggest that we do not add any General Fund positions," Norton said. Norton also urged supervisors to support a freeze on filling any vacant positions.

That proposal will likely meet opposition from department heads at budget hearings that will resume at 9 a.m. today in the Sequoia Room of the CalWORKS building at 509 E. St. Charles St., San Andreas.

"That is not going to sit well with me at all," Sheriff Gary Kuntz said of Norton's recommendation that the county not hire any new employees in the coming year.

Kuntz said his agency has 13 fewer deputies to patrol the region than it had in 2007. And that's counting the three additional deputies he was authorized to hire last year.

"We are trying to get people back on the streets," Kuntz said. He said he will ask supervisors to approve hiring three more deputies in the 2013-14 fiscal year.

County number crunchers say they are already draining a variety of longtime accounts to make the budget balance in the coming year. In the next five years,

for example, most of an \$8 million fund accumulated from penalties when people paid property taxes late is proposed to go to a variety of purposes, including replacing the county's tax collection, property assessment, and property records software system.

Norton's proposed budget would use \$2.8 million of that fund in the coming year to balance the budget.

Norton noted that the county's financial reserves for emergencies and the contingency fund for unexpected non-emergency expenses are below the levels needed to meet the board's own goals or to maintain a solid credit rating.

Norton said a number of uncertainties could derail her proposed budget, including weakening of the national economy, state government raids on county funds and unexpected costs to operate the new county jail, scheduled to open by the end of the year.

"This graph shows why I am strongly concerned about increasing expenses," Norton said, pointing to a chart showing that even if housing values rebound modestly, county expenses will continue to outstrip revenues.

County Assessor Leslie Davis said that after five years of decline, she is projecting the new tax roll she is preparing based on Jan. 1 values will be flat.

Norton said she plans to look for ways to increase revenue.

"I am going to recommend that the board look at some targeted fee increases," she said.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.