

CALAVERAS COUNTY APPROVES TENUOUS BUDGET

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SAN ANDREAS - A bare-bones, \$139 million Calaveras County budget for the coming fiscal year won the grudging approval Tuesday of the Board of Supervisors.

After four straight years of cuts, county departments are for the most part a shadow of what they once were. Sheriff deputies no longer have time to respond to burglary reports. Health workers can't keep up with sexually transmitted disease outbreaks. Roadside weeds go unsprayed.

The budget for the fiscal year that begins Sunday is about 10 percent smaller than the previous year's spending plan. And the decisions county leaders made on how to shrink it prompted sometimes-bitter exchanges.

"We're having what I consider to be a primitive conversation," said Supervisor Steve Wilensky after a number of speakers, including board member Darren Spellman, urged the board to gut other departments in order to add five deputies to the staff of Sheriff Gary Kuntz.

Wilensky urged his colleagues to consider the whole picture and the possibility of reducing the number of departments as a way to lower costs and save services.

"We are in a web of our own design," Wilensky said.

The vote for the budget was 4-1, with Spellman opposed.

Spellman said his constituents expect him to make the Sheriff's Department his top priority, even if it means eliminating some other services. "It just needs to be done."

Supervisor Merita Callaway, in contrast, said essential services other than the Sheriff's Department are also in danger of collapse and also contribute to public safety.

"Would I close the libraries to hire four more sheriff deputies? No, I won't," Callaway said.

Callaway said that many departments contribute to public safety, including those that care for abused children, assist abused adults, run elections and collect rabid animals.

"I think this board does what it can with the resources it has," Callaway said.

Board Chairman Gary Tofanelli urged his colleagues to take a larger view.

"It's not just here it's happening," Tofanelli said, noting that Stockton police no longer come to investigate burglaries at his steel-construction business headquarters. "It's happening all over because of current economic conditions in the nation."

The coming year's budget has a contingency fund of only \$162,514, or about one-tenth of 1 percent. That's only a sliver of the 2 to 3 percent contingency fund county administrators recommend.

Meanwhile, in another sign of the times, the board approved taking \$54,367 from the current year's contingency fund to help pay unexpected expenses at the county's Animal Services Division suffered as a result of rescuing and caring for neglected horses.

Since the recession hit in 2008, Animal Control officers have had a number of incidents in which they've been called to assist starving horses.

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