

CALAVERAS BUDGET IS BARE-BONES

PRELIMINARY PLAN HAS ALMOST NO RESERVE FUNDS

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SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County government will be just one large wildland fire away from going broke under a preliminary budget that won the informal blessing Friday of the county's Board of Supervisors.

The board will vote June 26 to approve a preliminary budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. Friday, the board directed county staff to prepare that budget leaving only \$162,514 in the contingency fund, or just over one-tenth of 1 percent of the total budget of \$139 million.

County Administrative Officer Jeanne Boyce recommends that the county should have a contingency fund equal to 3 to 5 percent of the total budget. At a bare minimum, agencies generally try for a contingency fund of at least 2 percent, or somewhere around \$3 million in the case of Calaveras County.

Such contingency funds make it possible to deal with unexpected repairs, to pay salaries while waiting for tax revenue to arrive and to handle costs of natural disasters such as wildfires.

"That contingency really needs to be increased," Boyce said. "We can go through \$1 million in a wildfire pretty quick."

The board didn't increase it, however, because years of shrinking revenue have left county departments already running ragged.

During hearings this week, representatives of the departments told the board that roads are going unrepaired, weeds will soon go unsprayed and an outbreak of sexually transmitted diseases among 15- to 19-year-old women isn't getting the attention it needs, all due to cuts in staffing and loss of revenue.

The budget cuts are making it difficult to even collect the revenue, a fact that sparked some heated discussion between the board and Calaveras County Assessor Leslie Davis.

Last year, Davis warned that cuts done then would make it unwise to devote her remaining workers to preparing the unsecured tax roll that assesses boats, airplanes and equipment owned by businesses.

A year later, county supervisors learned that not processing that unsecured tax roll is causing a loss to county schools of about \$700,000 and also will mean the loss of state funding for law enforcement boat patrols, because the county no longer can match its share from taxes on local boats.

After a hurried and sometimes tense discussion, representatives of other county offices agreed to provide resources so Davis can process at least the boat portion of the unsecured roll.

Davis estimates the value of real property assessments (the secured roll that includes houses, bare land, and business buildings) will decline about 7.5 percent for the coming fiscal year, an estimate that is built into the preliminary budget.

In fact, that preliminary budget would already be unbalanced if officials had included money they plan to spend starting in December to hire staff for a new jail due to be completed in October 2013.

Officials did not include those costs in the hope that the county's fiscal situation will improve before the final 2012-13 county budget must be adopted in October.

Boyce had presented the board with a preliminary budget that included a contingency fund of \$264,861. The board decided to use more than \$100,000 of that to fund various requests, including a service technician for the county jail, an Agriculture Department employee and a machine that will allow the Sheriff's Department to incinerate illegal drugs.

The board did not grant Sheriff Gary Kuntz's request for \$420,000 to hire five additional deputies.

That prompted an apology from board President Gary Tofanelli.

"I would love to fund all the positions you are asking for now. You know that," he said to Kuntz. "We've given out all the funds that we have."

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