

# County close to forming parks dept.

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Funding a parks and recreation department took center stage last week as the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors began working on the budget for the next fiscal year.

Under consideration by the board at the June 11 meeting was the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Recommended Budget submitted by County Executive Officer Teresa Hitchcock.

The overall budget proposal came in at \$360,435,892, an increase of \$4.52 million or 1.3 percent over current budget, while the General Fund portion of the budget is \$83,644,890, an increase of \$2.56 million or 3.2 percent more than the current budget.

While most of the budget is earmarked for state and federal programs, the board has the greatest discretion over the General Fund portion of the yearly spending plan.

The board went through the document by department with none to little public feedback until the matter of how to distribute Transit Occupancy Tax funds came up.

TOT funds are the room tax charged for lodging. County voters in 2018 adopted a measure to raise the room tax from 6 to 12 percent and the county is projecting \$2.65 million will be collected in 2024-25 from the tax.

The board in past years has divided TOT funds between the fire districts, the sheriff's office, public works and the Calaveras Visitors Bureau. In the current budget, the board gave the Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce \$50,000 and set aside \$279,000 of TOT money to fund a park and recreation master plan.

The recommended budget had \$662,500 going to the fire districts, \$662,500 for the sheriff's office, \$627,184 to public works and \$400,000 for the visitors bureau. That left \$297,816 in discretionary funding.

Judy Allen, chair of the Calaveras County Parks and Recreation Committee, submitted a letter from the committee recommending another \$279,000 be devoted toward parks and recreation to begin hiring staff for a new parks and rec department "with the intention of creating valuable and much-needed recreation programming for county residents."

The parks and rec staff could establish summer day camps for children, fitness programs for seniors, sports leagues and a variety of other activities, Allen said.

The parks master plan is still in development. Public input on the plan was gathered this spring and a draft of the plan is anticipated to be released later this year.

With completion and adoption of the plan, the county will be able to move forward with future parks and recreation programs, Allen added, but without a staff, such programs will stall.

Allen's comments were echoed by several other members of the public.

In the end, the board decided to allocate \$250,000 to parks and rec and the remaining \$47,816 to the chamber.

However, the board agreed those allocations and others could change before the final budget is approved in September as the State of California grapples with a multi-billion budget deficit that could seriously impact county finances.