

135 candidates

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County's general fund is hit hard

Facing an 'ugly' fiscal crisis, the El Dorado supervisors cut \$3.6 million from the budget.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published October 5, 2003*)

The El Dorado County Board of Supervisors has approved \$3.6 million in general fund budget cuts following two weeks of hearings.

As the county approved the \$155.8 million 2003-04 general fund budget following the cuts Tuesday, board chairwoman Helen Baumann described the county's fiscal situation as "ugly" and added, "It's only going to continue to get more ugly."

Although Chief Administrative Officer Laura Gill said Friday that she doesn't anticipate employee layoffs under the current budget, that could change in December when the board considers reorganizing county operations. And while the county is engaged in contract negotiations with employee groups, Gill said the budget does not include funds for salary increases.

All county departments had been asked to propose cuts, but Supervisor Charlie Paine said he had been told that some departments were resisting. Paine sternly warned department directors Tuesday to cooperate with Gill to bring the budget in line.

In addition to reducing funding for county operations, the board cut funding for nongovernmental agencies, including the El Dorado Arts Council and El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce.

Baumann said the board was unanimous in backing the cuts at the end of hearings Monday. "All five made the decision with the same amount of pain," she said. "Not one supervisor felt good about what happened (Monday)."

But an 11th-hour debate arose Tuesday when Supervisor Jack Sweeney said he believed the board had erred in cutting funding for two manager positions in the Information Technology Department.

Sweeney said he had been told that eliminating those positions would have an unintended impact on computer services necessary for other departments to operate efficiently.

His concerns were echoed by Recorder-Clerk Bill Schultz and Assessor Tim Holcomb.

Schultz said the Information Technology Department drives county operations and suggested other departments should contribute funds to support its technicians.

"We have one of the most modern recorder's offices in the state, and it's because of these guys," Schultz said.

The board agreed to retain the positions if department director Patrick Hale comes up with comparable cuts elsewhere in his budget.

But Gill warned that those positions could be eliminated in December.

The \$155.8 million general fund budget the board adopted Tuesday was about \$1 million less than the proposed budget approved in June but approximately \$3.6 million less than the "addenda" budget presented in September.

The total budget figure of \$276.6 million represents an increase over the \$273 million proposed budget but a decrease from September's \$280 million addenda budget.

The board opted to put the \$3.6 million in general fund savings aside for emergencies, bringing the general fund reserve to \$7.2 million, or 4.65 percent of the total general fund appropriations.

Gill said these reserves could be used only for situations defined as emergencies under state law, and appropriating them would require a four-fifths vote of the board.

Supervisors said they were pleased with the increase in reserve funds. But Auditor Joe Harn said, "I was hoping for more structural improvement in the budget."

He argued that many of the cuts represent one-time savings rather than long-term solutions to the county's fiscal problems.

"We need to reduce operating costs," he said, "not one-time expenses."

Tuesday's board action left executives of the Arts Council and the Chamber of Commerce revising their budgets, or in the Arts Council's case, considering whether it could stay in business.

County funding for the council was reduced from \$70,000 last year to \$11,000 for the 2003-04 fiscal year.

The county last year increased its support for the council from the \$30,000 of previous years to compensate for the the council's loss of state funding due to budget cuts.

Director Kaaren Boothroyd said the Arts Council's board of directors met Thursday night and is determined to try to raise enough money through private donations and special events to continue at least some of its services. Priority will be given to arts programs for children, she said.

Local artists and musicians have offered their talents for fund-raising events, Boothroyd said.

"It's not going to be easy," she said, "but it's going to be inspiring."

Laurel Brent-Bumb, executive director of the El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce, said she was reviewing her budget Friday.

She said county funds accounted for \$240,000 of the chamber's \$487,000 budget, and the Board of Supervisors' action Tuesday eliminated

\$55,000 earmarked for tourism promotion and public service information.

About the Writer

The Bee's Cathy Locke can be reached at (916) 608-7451 or clocke@sacbee.com.

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