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County Budget Approved

There was a packed house for Thursday morning's meeting of the Ellis County Commissioners' Court, a scheduled public hearing regarding the 2010-2011 budget, with action on that budget following the hearing.

"In this budget, we were charged with three goals," said County Auditor Mike Navarro. "One – no increase in taxes. Two – to have as small an impact as we could make on services the county provides to the citizens. Three – we did not want to affect the take home pay for a single employee. We did have some instances where we had to cut positions, but other than that we were able to meet those goals."

Navarro added that the proposed budget as posted by County Judge Carol Bush is a balanced budget.

"We don't run deficit budgets here," he said. "This isn't Washington, it's Waxahachie."

Navarro detailed the changes in the budget compared to fiscal year 2009-2010, beginning with those changes that have direct impact on county employees: a freeze on new accrual of longevity pay and a decrease in retirement benefits.

"Our retirement match is currently \$2.25 to \$1, and it is proposed to reduce that to \$2 to \$1," Navarro said. "One dollar is taxpayer funded, 32 cents is from fines, fees and collections, and the rest is funded from people that don't make retirement."

Navarro added that although thousands of people have been employed by the county over the years, only 116 employees and 33 beneficiaries of deceased employees are currently receiving monthly benefits.

"Those benefits average about \$900 a month – not the lavish retirement it has been made out to be," he said. "In fact, \$900 a month puts you under the federal poverty level."

Filling the seats and standing along the back wall were many county employees. Those addressing the Court took care to say they were using their own time to attend.

"I want to say to the employees here that if there is anything that has made you feel that you are not valued, that is not my opinion and that is not the case," said Bush. "It is not freeloading that

you get a paycheck. It is not freeloading that you get retirement benefits. So if there has been any hint that your contributions are less than honorable or worthy, I want to dispel that right now.”

Lt. Jason Westmoreland of the Sheriff’s Office was the first employee to address the Court, representing the Sheriff’s Association’s 120 members. Westmoreland commended Commissioner Bill Dodson, pct. 2 and Commissioner Ron Brown, pct. 4 for taking time to meet with employees regarding proposed cuts.

“The Sheriff’s Office has not seen a pay increase since 2000 when we asked the voters for one,” he added. “Cost of living adjustments have been given out, but the cost of living has risen at a higher pace, so this means for years we have taken cut after cut after cut. Sooner or later you are going to back us into a corner, and the Sheriff’s Association will have no choice but to come out swinging.”

Carla Phillips, a three-year employee of the County Clerk’s Office, told the court that the murder of her mother-in-law four years ago had brought home to her family the importance of keeping competent county employees. “I am here to show support for the proposed budget as filed,” Phillips said. “It will negatively affect county employees, but it will minimally do so.”

Sam Knoll, an 18-year employee with Road and Bridge Precinct 1, focused his remarks on the service provided to the public.

“In precinct 1, we don’t have potholes – ours are filled. At 2 o’clock in the morning, when the Sheriff’s Department calls and says a storm has knocked trees down in the streets, we don’t wait till morning. In the morning, when our taxpayers get out to go to their jobs to earn their retirement, they don’t have to wonder is the water over the road: county employees have been out that night and put up warning signs,” he said. “Over the past six years, precinct one has reconstructed an average of 25 miles per year, not counting the preventive maintenance we do.”

Conard Yates of Waxahachie, who is not an employee of the county, joined Knoll in advising the Court that it might make more sense to approve a slight tax increase than to cut employee wages and benefits.

“My recommendation is as follows,” he said. “Look at the tax rate and carefully consider developing a formula to meet our budget and not ask only our hourly and salaried employees to make a sacrifice to balance the budget. Let’s all do our fair share.”

Former County Treasurer Ron Langenheder voiced his continued opposition to an increase in the salaries of elected officials approved in 2006. County Republican Chair Dan Davis encouraged the Court to approve the budget as submitted.

County Clerk Cindy Polley supported the budget as presented, but also pointed out that recent increases in co-pays and deductibles on employee health insurance amounted to a “virtual salary decrease,” adding that employees are the county’s greatest asset.

“No decrease in benefits is ever welcome, but sometimes it’s better than the alternative,” she said. “We are happy to have insurance for our families. I am of the opinion that the benefit changes proposed are more palatable than other alternatives. Personnel cuts, furlough days, elimination of longevity and more drastic reductions have all been on the table, and those would be much harder to take than what has been proposed.”

Several other employees spoke, some in favor of the proposed budget, and some opposed. All wanted the Court to recognize employees for their dedication and hard work.

“There is no ‘us and them,’” said Human Services Director Diana Buckley. “We are all in the same boat. Just like a competition rowing team, someone has to call the cadence, and that’s you. Not only do you have to set the budget, you have to set the mood. Your recognition of the

contribution of the rest of the team is a cornerstone of that team's performance. Your taking your place as one of 'us' is what builds an environment where there is no 'them.'"

Dodson recalled times in his 37 years with St. Gobain that personnel cuts had to be made, as well as a time shortly after he left there that management goals were not met and the end result was the loss of 125 jobs. "It's not fun making this decision, but it's one I've been elected to make, and I will vote my conscience," he said. "I believe the budget that's been proposed is fair."

"Before we vote on this, I would like to know, from your heart, if this passes, the first thing we look at next budget if the money is there is to reinstate the retirement program and start adding back to it," said Brown. "I think we've got a bunch of good employees. Our termination rate is down, and I think it is because of our benefits."

"I would like to think about next year looking into attrition, see if we are all where we need to be," said Commissioner Heath Sims, pct. 3. "If we don't need the person, don't replace them."

Sims also asked that road and bridge budgets be re-allocated, and later offered to transfer funding from his budget to re-instate a vacant, part-time position that was eliminated in the proposed budget.

"I want to thank everyone for coming," said Commissioner Dennis Robinson, pct. 1. "This is a fiscally responsible budget. I want to thank the employees for being understanding and for doing your part – you are doing your part to help out with this budget and I want to thank you."

In the end, the Court voted unanimously to approve the budget as proposed. The final step in the 2010-2011 budget process will be final approval of the tax rate on September 27, during a regularly scheduled meeting of the Court.