

Constitutional officers outline their budgets

BUDGET

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fund from county property taxes.

However, by statute, the county can only budget 95% of that amount, meaning the initial budget reflects \$13,490,000 in general fund property taxes and \$1,909,000 in the MSTU fund.

The commission was presented Monday morning with an initial budget totaling \$100.6 million -- an increase of \$19.9 million (25%) over the current year budget total.

However, much of that increase was not in local spending or taxes, but instead in new state and federal grants, some of which the county received in the wake of Hurricane Idalia last fall.

New grant funding received over the past year -- after the current budget was finalized last September -- included: \$7.3 million in additional state road resurfacing funds, \$5 million for canal dredging, \$3 million in emergency housing rehabilitation funds and \$1.2 million for improvements at Perry-Foley Airport.

By fund, the \$100 million county budget includes: general fund, \$47.3 million; airport fund, \$5.5 million; road and bridge fund, \$3.6 million; secondary road paving fund, \$3.7 million; MSTU fund, \$5.7 million, solid waste fund, \$2.6 million; affordable housing fund, \$986,000; small county surtax, \$6.1 million; SCOP/SCRAP/paving funds, \$15.4 million; American Rescue Plan fund, \$4.2 million; Airport Enterprise fund, \$435,000; Tourism Development (bed tax) fund, \$1.1 million, Tourism Infrastructure fund (third cent bed tax), \$435,000 and Tourism Operations fund (fourth and fifth cent bed tax), \$1.3 million.

Overall, the county's general fund totals \$47.5 million, which is paid for by \$13.49 million in property taxes, \$2.6 million in state revenue sharing, \$1 million from the state for fiscally-constrained counties, \$8.6 million in state grants and \$2.1 million in federal grants.

The amount of county reserves in the general fund are also on the rise, with the reserve for capital improvements (where any unspent funds in the current year are placed) set to rise by around \$1.5 million.

In the budget, that reserve fund is increasing by \$4.5 million -- but \$3 million of that total consists of funds being returned to the regular reserve account after they were removed last fall following Hurricane Idalia and placed in a special reserve account to cover hurricane-related expenses.

The initial budget is balanced in the general and MSTU fund, with projected surpluses in recurring revenue over recurring expenses of \$280,931 and \$18,288 respectively.

Those surpluses are projected despite the budget including a proposed \$1/hour raise for all county employees for 2024-25, which is expected to cost a total of \$685,000 across all funds, including the constitutional officers.

The commission agreed this past spring to include the raise in the initial budget in an attempt to counter wage compression due to the mandatory increase in the state minimum wage. Last year, the commission included a \$2/hour raise for all employees.

The board did request that the costs of the raise be presented so it could be removed from the budget should it be deemed necessary.

According to the figures presented Monday, the raise-related expenses in the general fund are broken out to include: Taylor County Sheriff's Office (\$284,494); county departments (\$77,903); Clerk of Court's office (\$50,931); Property Appraiser's office (\$21,050); Tax Collector's Office (\$31,731) and Supervisor of Elections' office (\$8,410).

In other funds, the raise will cost \$1,248 in the Airport fund, \$75,540 in the Road & Bridge fund, \$84,100 in the MSTU fund, \$47,340 in the Solid Waste fund, \$547 in the landfill fund, \$1,190 in the SHIP/Affording Housing fund, and \$1,032 in the Airport Enterprise fund.

The commission engaged in very little discussion on the overall budget during Monday's workshop, instead listening to presentations from four of the five constitutional officers, as well as Doctors' Memorial Hospital and the Taylor County Development Authority.

Earlier this year, the commission urged all department heads and constitutional officers to look for ways to cut their budgets in the coming year

in light of the expected revenue losses next year.

However, in the initial budget, the supervisor of elections was the only constitutional officer to present a 2024-25 budget request that was smaller than the current year, prompting questions from commissioners.

The requested budgets from the constitutional officers in the General Fund were:

- Taylor County Sheriff Wayne Padgett: \$9,395,745 -- an increase of \$523,032 (5.9%);

- Taylor County Tax Collector Mark Wiggins: \$330,921 -- an increase of \$63,969 (23.8%);

- Taylor County Clerk of Courts Gary Knowles: \$1,144,592 -- an increase of \$28,056 (2.5%);

- Taylor County Property Appraiser Shawna Beach: \$1,083,817 -- an increase of \$25,038 (2.4%);

- Taylor County Supervisor of Elections Dana Southerland: \$683,373 -- a decrease of \$33,871 (-4.7%).

On Monday, Beach, Wiggins, Knowles and Southerland discussed their budgets with the commission, with Padgett scheduled to follow at the second workshop on Thursday.

The officers explained that rising costs -- including the \$1/hour raise -- were driving their budgets higher, but also outlined plans to cut costs moving forward, most of which would be through employee attrition and not replacing those who retire.

Property Appraiser

Beach, who presented first, stated that most of her cost increases were due to rising contracts for the various software systems used by her office. She said she attempted to cut elsewhere in her budget to offset those increases, noting that without the raise, her budget would be within \$7,000 of the current year.

Currently, the property appraiser's office has eight full-time and one part-time employee, with Beach noting that she has several employees who may retire in the next several years, and she does not plan to replace them, instead shifting those duties to other employees.

Tax Collector

Wiggins was next, and when asked about what appeared to be a 23.8% increase in his requested budget for the General

Fund, he explained that the additional \$2/hour raise approved last year was inadvertently left out of his 2023-24 final budget.

"I'll take the blame for that," Wiggins said, noting that including that \$2/hour raise -- in addition to the new \$1 raise on the table for this year -- as well as other increased costs, resulted in what appears to be a significant budget jump.

Wiggins explained that his current year budget was later amended to include the \$2/hour raise given to all county workers last year, adding, "If you were to take out the \$2/hour raise that was inadvertently left out last year and the proposed \$1/hour raise this year, my budget would actually show a decrease."

Unlike the other constitutional officers, Wiggins' office generates a large amount of revenue to fund his operations. Wiggins received a total of \$441,804 in the current year from all county tax revenues (General Fund, MSTU and MSBU combined), representing a fraction (34%) of his overall \$1.3 million budget. His total budget request from the county totals \$474,294 in the upcoming year.

Wiggins noted he has spent the past several years looking for ways to relocate his two offices in the courthouse out of the building so he could consolidate all three of his offices in one location, including the driver's license office (former Florida Highway Patrol station) on U.S. 19 north of Perry.

However, with the expected losses in tax revenues, Wiggins said he is now working on a plan to consolidate all of those offices into one at the courthouse. That would allow him to reduce his workforce from 11 to eight, with at least two of those employee cuts coming due to retirements.

Wiggins added that residents seem to enjoy utilizing the Hwy. 19 driver's license office, sometimes driving past the courthouse to get there. He said he does not expect to close that office yet and would like to "hold onto it as long as I can," adding that he has a plan in place if it becomes necessary.

Clerk of Court

Knowles stated that his biggest cost increases were in informational technology (IT) and paper products, noting that one contract

increased \$6,500 per year.

On the revenue side, his office processed 250 passports last fiscal year and has done 200 so far this year, generating around \$8,000.

Knowles pointed out that his budget would have dropped \$5,311 if not for the proposed \$1/hour raise.

Currently, the clerk's office has 21 employees, including three-part-time workers. Knowles said he knows of two employees that could be retiring in the near future, and he does not plan to replace one of them.

Supervisor of Elections

Southerland noted that unlike the other constitutional officers, her budget request did not include the proposed \$1/hour raise. If included, her budget would still be \$25,461 below the current year.

She explained to the board that any changes in state election law can and will affect her budget.

Currently, Southerland has three employees, in addition to herself, and she noted that one might be leaving in the future. She added that she is looking at ways to spread those duties around and not fill the position.

However, unlike during the earlier discussions, several commissioners cautioned Southerland about stretching herself and her employees too thin, complimenting her on how "lean" she already runs her office.

Southerland thanked the commissioners for the sentiment.

She also noted that sometime this year she would need to discuss the county's voting equipment, which was purchased on a seven-year lease funded by a state grant. That lease expires at the end of this year, and Southerland said she would need to decide whether to move forward with a service agreement or look at other options.

Sheriff

Padgett discussed his budget at the start of Thursday's workshop, presenting a breakdown of his projected expenses, which include \$7.83 million in "personal services" (salaries, insurance and retirement benefits, etc.) and \$1.5 million in operations.

Padgett's \$9.4 million budget request includes an increase of \$523,032 (5.9%) due primarily to the proposed \$1/hour raise (\$284,494) for the TCSO's

96 employees. Padgett said the remaining \$238,538 increase in budget requests were due to rising costs of gas, tires, retirement and other expenses.

Currently, TCSO has 88 full-time employees and eight part-time employees.

Padgett's proposed \$9.39 million operational budget does not include an additional estimated \$625,000 in capital outlay purchases the TCSO expects to make using one-cent local option sales tax.

The TCSO has been receiving 25% of the county's one-cent sales tax revenues (approximately \$625,000 per year) to make capital purchases not included in its operational budget.

Padgett concluded his presentation Thursday by requesting the commission continue the 25% allocation in the 2024-25 fiscal year.

Noting the anticipated tax revenue losses coming in the future, several commissioners asked Padgett if he could trim his budget some this year in preparation for potentially bigger cuts in future years.

Padgett responded that he would have to start with "low-hanging fruit," which would include cutting inmate work squads. Currently, the county contracts with the sheriff for two work squads utilizing Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) inmates and Taylor County Sheriff's Office (TCSO) personnel -- one dedicated to the Taylor County Sports Complex and one for parks maintenance.

Commission Chair Jamie English asked if Padgett, like other constitutional officers, had any employees close to retirement whose duties could be spread out to others.

Padgett said he has one employee in the DROP program whose duties could be shifted to others upon their retirement.

Additional budget workshops are scheduled for Monday, July 22, and (if needed) Thursday, July 25, each starting at 9 a.m.

A special meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 30, to set the county's proposed property tax millage rates. Once those rates are set, they cannot be raised later in the budget process, but they can be lowered.

The commission will then hold two public hearings in September to set the tentative and final millage rates, along with adopting the final budget.

Investigation has been turned over to the State Attorney

GAMBLING

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"He used all of the machines in each location, with the exception of two that were actively being used by other people. He put money in the machines to determine that they were operational and played a game of chance," Gray added.

"The way the machines work is that winners are issued a ticket, which they turn into the clerk and receive their payout (cash).

The machines were located out in the open inside the stores," he said.

Search warrants for the four locations -- The Stop & Go (1610 South Byron Butler Parkway), Country Kitchen (1305 U.S. Highway 98), Munchie's (1200 South Byron Butler Parkway) and the Marathon convenience store located at 2410 South Byron Butler Parkway -- were served simultaneously on July 8, with all machines and the money contained inside being seized.

Six machines were seized from The Stop & Go, three machines from the Country Kitchen, four machines from Munchie's and two machines from the Marathon store.

"The machines were not actually owned by the stores, but were leased to them by another individual, who admitted to delivering and setting up the gambling machines. The store owners and/or lessees stated they knew

the machines were in their stores and thought it was legal in the state of Florida," Gray said.

While no arrests have

been made, Gray said the investigation has been turned over to the State Attorney's Office, and warrants are forthcoming.

The PPD has also started the forfeiture process regarding the machines and gambling proceeds seized during the investigation.

LEGALS

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A RIGHT TO FUNDS REMAINING AFTER THE SALE, YOU MUST FILE A CLAIM WITH THE CLERK NO LATER THAN THE DATE THAT THE CLERK REPORTS THE FUNDS AS UNCLAIMED. IF YOU FAIL TO FILE A CLAIM, YOU WILL NOT BE ENTITLED TO ANY REMAINING FUNDS. AFTER THE FUNDS ARE REPORTED AS UNCLAIMED, ONLY THE OWNER OF RECORD AS OF THE DATE OF THE LIS PENDENS MAY CLAIM THE SURPLUS.

If you are a person with a disability who requires accommodations in order to participate in a court proceeding, you are entitled, at no cost to you, the provision of certain assistance. Please contact: Carrina Cooper, Court Administration, 173 NE Hernando Avenue, Room 408, Lake City, FL 32055; Phone: 386-758-163. Contact Court

Administration at least 7 days before your scheduled court appearance, or immediately upon receiving this notification if the time before the scheduled appearance is less than 7 days; if you are hearing impaired call 711. Dated this 12 day of July, 2024.

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SALE NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that SunCo Storage- Steinhatchee will sell the contents of the following self-storage units by public auction to satisfy their liens against these tenants, in accordance with the Florida Self-Storage Facility Act. The auction will take place online at storagetreasures.com from 9AM on August 1st to Noon on August 4th. Units are believed to contain household items, unless otherwise listed. SunCo Storage - 821 Beach Rd Steinhatchee, FL 32359 Auction is with credit/debit card payments only. A \$100 refundable cleaning deposit is required. The auction will be listed and advertised on www.storagetreasures.com. All purchased items are sold as is, where is, and must be removed within 48 hours. Sale is subject to cancellation in the event of a settlement with the tenant.
Name/Unit: CODY WELLS - UNIT 17



What does the future hold for the Tree Capital of the South?

What does "living the good life in Taylor County" mean to you? With the region's economy facing challenges from recent storm damage and economic uncertainty, we want to hear from you about your priorities for the region's future.



Please complete our anonymous survey by scanning the QR code, or online at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TaCo2040>

Taylor County 2040 is an outreach and education program by 1000 Friends of Florida and the University of Florida's Center for Landscape Conservation Planning, with the goal of connecting rural and agricultural landowners with resources to safeguard Taylor County's economic future, while protecting its rural quality of life.