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Printed on page B1

## Proposed County Budget Comes in At \$1.3 Bil.

**Plan has no hikes in property tax or fire fees, with lower garbage cost.**

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THE LEDGER

Published: Thursday, September 9, 2010 at 11:02 p.m.

BARTOW | Polk County commissioners gave tentative approval Wednesday to next year's proposed \$1.3 billion budget - a drop from \$1.6 billion for the current year.

The new budget contains no increase in the property tax rate or fire assessments and contains a decrease in the garbage assessment.

The property tax rate for operations and environmental lands debt service, which applies countywide, will remain at \$6.87 per \$1,000 of taxable value.

For a homeowner with a home appraised on the tax roll at \$150,000 and a \$50,000 homestead exemption, that will mean a county tax bill of \$687.

Commissioner Randy Wilkinson proposed lowering the tax rate to \$6.78 per \$1,000, but the motion failed, 4-1. He then joined the unanimous vote to approve the previously agreed-upon tax rate.

In addition, property owners in unincorporated Polk County pay an additional 63 cents per \$1,000 for parks and libraries, which means an additional \$63 in taxes using the example cited above. Under state law, commissioners could have raised the rate to 74 cents per \$1,000.

Because of the drop in the value of the county's tax roll, under state law commissioners could have raised the tax rate for operations by 14 percent to \$7.93 per \$1,000 to obtain the same amount of property tax revenue next year as the budget received this year.

The countywide tax rate commissioners approved will raise \$177.5 million. If commissioners had raised the tax rate as allowed by law, the county would have collected an additional \$29.4 million in revenue.

Next year's proposed county budget is less than this year's \$1.6 billion budget, reflecting the continuing decline in the county's tax base and the continued cost-cutting imposed by County Manager Mike Herr over the past three years.

Those cuts have included the layoffs of 272 employees over the past two years and the consolidation of various county operations as administrators retired and were not replaced.

The leaner budget has also meant cuts in a number of social welfare and cultural programs, some of whose representatives attended Wednesday's meeting to ask commissioners to reconsider the cuts.

Maureen Kelly of the West Central Florida Area Agency on Aging, said she was concerned that \$430,797 cut from programs that help the elderly will reduce the number of elderly residents who receive assistance to continue living independently.

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be simpler?

Commission Chairman Bob English said he sympathized with the request, but commissioners have had to make hard choices to balance the budget.

"We cut the low-priority programs; this year we had to get into the high-priority programs," he said.

Representatives from the Early Learning Coalition and Polk Vision made similar pleas.

No one else from the public spoke regarding the proposed budget.

Some of the major changes between this year's and next year's budget include reduced capital expenditures because of a combination of factors that included the decision not to issue bonds, the loss of revenue as a result of the impact fee moratorium and the completion of some projects.

The final hearing on the budget will be at 6 p.m. on Sept. 16 in the commission chambers in Bartow.

The new fiscal year begins on Oct. 1.

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