



Franklin County

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PRESS RELEASE

COUNTY LAUNCHES BUDGET WEBSITE

For Immediate Release
December 20, 2011

Rocky Mount, Virginia --- Franklin County, Virginia today announced it has launched an interactive budget portal on the County's website: <http://www.franklincountyva.gov> . While the County has long posted its budgets and financial reports online, the new budget portal synchronizes multiple budget items into one central location. The budget site provides informational topics designed for navigational ease including:

- Description guide to the budget process
- Calendar of budget meetings and work sessions
- Previous and current year budgets
- County financial health information
- Factors affecting current and future budgets
- Comparison budget and tax information from adjoining localities
- Citizen input module for residents wishing to give budget feedback and suggestions

In addition to the site's comprehensive budget information and navigational ease, the site further allows residents to stay connected with their County budget through social media avenues like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. "Franklin County recognizes that citizens expect both transparency and connectivity in their daily activities. The local government budget is not excluded from this expectation" stated Richard E. Huff, II, County Administrator.

The County's budget website encompasses a comprehensive look at County finances, including demographic, tax, and spending comparative data. Website users can examine how the County fares with its neighbors in various program areas, as well as offer budget input and keep up with the latest budget activities (presentations, meetings, work sessions, public hearings, etc.).

The County encourages citizens to visit the budget website as the Board of Supervisors begins to work on next fiscal year's (2012-2013) budget. The website is available online 24/7 and will be continuously updated throughout the budget season. Please visit the site <http://www.franklincountyva.gov> and click the budget website link.

Wednesday, December 21, 2011

Franklin County's new online feature details finances

A new feature on the Franklin County website aims to help explain the county's budgeting process.

Unveiled during Tuesday's board of supervisors meeting, it outlines the county's financial health, the current fiscal year budget and the budget process. It also features a meetings calendar and compares Franklin County's tax rates to other localities' rates. Residents can provide feedback on the budgeting process.

"I think it's going to be of tremendous value to the county in terms of transparency and how citizens can access information," said Christopher Whitlow, assistant county administrator.

The website can be found at www.franklincountyva.gov.

Also Tuesday, board members announced the intention to dedicate the Franklin Center for Advanced Learning and Enterprise building to outgoing Blackwater District Supervisor Wayne Angell. Angell has served on the board for 24 years.

The board also honored outgoing Supervisor Russ Johnson, a two-term member of the board, and retiring Sheriff Ewell Hunt for 35 years of service in the sheriff's office.

-- Amy Matzke-Fawcett

THE ROANOKE TIMES
roanoke.com

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Friday, December 23, 2011

Editorial: To make a balanced budget

Franklin County helps taxpayers understand that financial plans are more than balance sheets.

Soon, Franklin County supervisors will sharpen their pencils and their wits in order to write a new budget. The task is made all the more difficult by a sluggish economic recovery, declining state aid and a huge drop in the market value of homes around Smith Mountain Lake.

Supervisors will have a lot of explaining to do. To help, the county recently launched a budget portal on the Franklin County website, franklincountyva.gov. As presentations go, this one is top-notch. It's easy to comprehend, loads quickly enough and, most importantly, provides useful information.

The site contains copies of the current and prior years' budgets that offer taxpayers a tutorial on supervisors' priorities and on how they've managed the county through the recession. This background is necessary in order to understand the challenges they now face.

Budgets are so much more than balance sheets. Municipal budgets reflect shifting needs of communities. To help understand what drives those needs, the website provides a wealth of information on demographics, along with a breakdown on how money is currently spent on things like education, public safety and recreation. Franklin County also offers its taxpayers a glimpse at how the neighbors allocate their funding. Taxpayers in Pittsylvania, Bedford and Botetourt counties, to name just a few, might also find Franklin's site useful.

While the comparisons are interesting to consider, it is helpful to keep in mind that each locality has its own challenges that play into budget-making. Martinsville-Henry County, for example, spends more than the others on economic development for good reason.

Franklin County's uniqueness has arrived through rapid population growth and a housing boom then bust at the lake. In 10 years between the 2000 and 2010 censuses, the county's population grew nearly 19 percent to 56,159. Unlike other places in Virginia with rapid growth, the increase in population did not show up in Franklin County's classrooms, as public school enrollment remained fairly flat.

However, there is a higher demand for water and sewer projects and for planning and zoning services - all competing for the county's resources. Balancing needs as well as dollars is key to writing a good budget.

Franklin's budget makers have done a good job in giving taxpayers the information and access they need to intelligently weigh whether the county strikes that balance.

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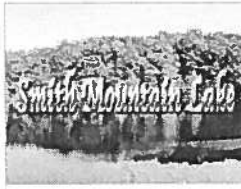
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County's budget details now available online

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Wednesday, December 28, 2011

By CHARLES BOOTHE - Staff Writer

Franklin County is now providing unprecedented budget details on its website.

Chris Whitlow, assistant county administrator, reviewed the website addition with the board of supervisors Tuesday.

"I think it's going to be of tremendous value to the county in terms of transparency," he said, adding that it will provide a comprehensive look at the budget for residents as well as economic development interests.

"The budget is the citizens' budget and we recognize that," he said. "They can go online and give feedback."

The new budget portal synchronizes multiple budget items into one central location.

The budget site provides informational topics designed for navigational ease including:

- "Description guide to the budget process
- "Calendar of budget meetings and work sessions
- "Previous and current year budgets
- "County financial health information
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- "Citizen input module for residents wishing to give budget feedback and suggestions

The site also allows residents to stay connected with the county budget through social media avenues like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

"Franklin County recognizes that citizens expect both transparency and connectivity in their daily activities," said county Administrator Rick Huff. "The local government budget is not excluded from this expectation."

Other information includes demographic, tax, and spending comparative data, Whitlow said, giving residents the chance to see how the county fares with its neighbors in various program areas.

"We want it to be as transparent as we can possibly make it and as helpful to citizens as we can possibly make it," Whitlow said.

Citizens are urged to visit the budget website as the board of supervisors begins to work on next fiscal year's (2012-2013) budget.

The website is available online 24/7 and will be continuously updated throughout the budget season. Visit the site <http://www.franklincountyva.gov> and click the budget website link.



Chris Whitlow

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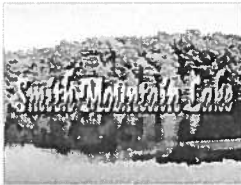
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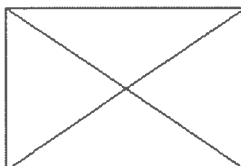
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Board reviews county's finances at work session

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Friday, January 27, 2012

By CHARLES BOOTHE - Staff Writer

With Franklin County facing another tough budget year, the board of supervisors heard a review of finances at a budget work session Tuesday evening.

Vincent Copenhaver, the county's finance director, explained a potential \$9.8 million shortfall for fiscal year 2012-13 and he told the board that there are few places left to cut.

In fact, he said, with an estimated additional department personnel and operating requests, another \$1 million would be needed, bringing the shortfall to \$10.8 million.

Of the projected shortfall, \$6 million is from the loss of real estate tax revenue after the 2012 reassessment and \$3.1 million is from the loss of school funding. Most members of the school board also attended the work session.

Copenhaver said that since 2008 the county has cut, or simply not filled, eight positions and made across-the-board cuts in many categories, from travel to office supplies to machinery and equipment.

"Some of the line items (in the county budget) have been totally eliminated," he said.

Another difficulty in making cuts is the fact that the county has "little or no control" over how more than \$26 million of the county's \$36 million (not including schools) budget is spent, Copenhaver said. That's because those categories include the sheriff's department, courts, local and regional jails, social service, comprehensive services, landfill operations, constitutional offices and public safety.

"We just don't have very much control over these at all," he said, adding that state funding cuts have forced the county to pick up a larger share of many expenses, especially the constitutional offices.

"The control over many positions and services is limited," county Administrator Rick Huff said. "What's left is really small. Where should we focus our efforts?"

Copenhaver showed the board a list of possible ways to either cut expenses or enhance revenue, a list that was first presented two years ago. Items on the list include imposing fees for recreation, increasing fees for the library, dog tags and landfill use, and curtailing some services.

Copenhaver also showed the board an example of the effects of raising the real estate tax rate from the current 48 cents on each \$100 of assessed value to 57.5 cents, which would eliminate the \$6 million loss.

In Rocky Mount, a house that had been assessed at \$200,000 in 2008 saw an annual tax of \$960 at the 48-cent rate. After the 2012 reassessment, the Rocky Mount District saw an average drop of 9.7 percent in real estate values. Using that figure and the 57.5-cent rate, the assessed value of that same house would drop to \$180,480, which would mean an annual tax of \$1,028.74.

The Gills Creek District saw the largest drop in real estate value, with an average 20.8 percent decline. The value of a \$200,000 in that district would now be \$158,260, using the 2012 reassessment decline rate.

Even with a 57.5-cent real estate tax rate, that Gills Creek homeowner would actually see a drop in the home's tax bill, from \$960 to \$902.

After the 2008 reassessment, home values across the county rose, with the Gills Creek District at that time seeing an overall increase of almost 60 percent in property values.

Blackwater District Supervisor Cline Brubaker said it was simply a matter of supply and demand, and those home prices were based on comparable sales. Many thought the prices of houses would continue to rise, he said.

"We've got to sit back and look (at the real estate tax rate) and determine what is the right thing to do," said Bob Camicia, Gills Creek District supervisor.

Supervisors Chairman David Cundiff reminded the board and those attending the meeting that it was just a work session and no decisions would be made.

"This is just a workshop," he said. "There is nothing in concrete."

Copenhaver also reviewed the school system's finances and said the system had a remaining balance of \$2.6 million at June 30, 2011. However, he said almost all of that money is earmarked for food service, Title I programs and adult education, and it must be spent in those categories. Of that money, \$418,128 was carried over for fuel costs and \$50,000 for a bus purchase.

"That money can only be used for expenses in certain categories," Cundiff said. "It cannot be transferred anywhere else in the budget."

Blue Ridge District Supervisor Bobby Thompson said when you look at the money the schools spent and reimbursements, the system is "pretty close to the break even point."



Vincent Copenhaver

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Boone District Supervisor Ronnie Thompson asked school board Chairman Ed Jamison if privatizing the bus service is still on the table as a way to save money.

"We have a lot more homework to do," Jamison said. "But, yes, we are seriously looking at it."

Huff said it is too early to know how any action by the General Assembly will affect funding to the county and schools.

"Have we seen all the General Assembly surprises?" asked Camicia.

"No, not by any stretch," Huff said. "We are working on a budget of what we hope is going to happen (no more drastic cuts)."

Assistant County Administrator Chris Whitlow said all of the information on the budget given to the board is also available online at the county's website, www.franklincountyva.org

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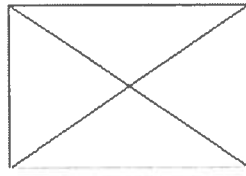


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Board is facing grim 2012-13 budget scenario

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Rick Huff

Friday, March 2, 2012

By CHARLES BOOTHE - Staff Writer

The Franklin County Board of Supervisors reviewed several scenarios for dealing with the upcoming budget in a work session Tuesday evening, including a real estate tax hike, cuts and new fees.

County Administrator Rick Huff said that, as a result of the 2012 reassessment, the county is facing a deficit in the real estate tax collections of almost \$6 million for fiscal year 2012-13. If impending cuts to the school system are figured in, as well as increases in payments to the Virginia Retirement System and increased health insurance costs for all county and school employees, the county could be facing a \$10.8 million shortfall from the current fiscal year, he added.

To offset the drop in real estate tax revenue, the rate would have to be raised from its current 48 cents on each \$100 of assessed value to 57 cents.

"This is probably the scenario nobody at this table wants," Huff told board members, referring to the 9-cent tax hike. But that's the only way for the county to remain "revenue neutral" for the real estate tax.

While the county would see level funding, residents would be affected, he said, with some tax bills going up and some down.

Huff also said the board could choose other options, and he showed the effects that various tax increases would have. For example, at 55 cents, the deficit would be \$1.2 million and at 53 cents, it would be \$2.4 million.

"Even with the 57-cent tax rate, we still have \$4.5 million (in school and other expenses) we have to absorb anyway," he said.

The board could also leave the rate at 48 cents and deal with the consequences, which would include drastic cuts in personnel and services.

Huff also said that many costs are mandatory and cannot be cut, from the regional jail (\$2.5 million a year) to Comprehensive Services (\$4.5 million) to Constitutional Offices (\$10.6 million)

"I've heard people say we have to live within our means, and I understand that," he said. "But what can we live without? ... Are you willing to cut this or raise this? Everybody's got a different set of priorities."

Huff presented the board with some options for revenue enhancements and cuts

Possible revenue enhancements include increased room rental rates at The Franklin Center (\$23,150 more a year), a parks and recreation fee of \$20 fee per child (\$80,000), increased landfill tipping fees (\$200,000), an increase in dog tag fees (\$29,000), higher vehicle license fees (\$400,000), elimination of amnesty on real estate tax interest (\$67,000) and an increase in the personal property tax rate (\$1.3 million).

Cuts being considered include reducing the local operational transfer to schools by as much as 10 percent (\$2.7 million), absorbing any increases in the VRS and health insurance, eliminating some green box sites and reducing library hours

The board told Huff not to consider any cuts in public safety, the economic development fund, the planning and building department or foster care prevention.

Blue Ridge District Supervisor Bobby Thompson said there needs to be a balance in cuts and revenue increases, but quality-of-life issues should be considered.

The budget scenario cannot be at the expense of making the county less attractive to potential business and industry, he said.

"Nobody wants it (any tax or fee increases), but we do want all of these other things," Thompson said.

"You can't cut your way to success," Gills Creek District Supervisor Bob Camicia agreed.

Supervisors are also looking at possible ways to give county employees either a pay raise, which they have not had in four years, or a bonus.

A new deputy with the sheriff's office will make the same as one who has been there for four years, Huff said.

But Snow Creek District Supervisor Leland Mitchell questioned whether the county should be asking for a tax increase from residents who have not had a pay raise in three or four years to help pay for a pay raise for county employees.

Huff made the presentation with the caveat that it can change, depending on any action related to the state budget by the General Assembly, especially the VRS rate expense that will be passed down to the county and school system.

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The board made no decisions on possible tax and fee hikes or cuts, but set another work session to continue to discuss the possibilities.

That work session is planned for Thursday, March 8 at 5:30 p.m. in the government center.

Huff said he will have a recommended budget for the board to review on March 20.

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Tax hikes, fees are part of plan for level funding

County's proposal does not include employee pay raises

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Rick Huff

Wednesday, March 21, 2012

By CHARLES BOOTHE - Staff Writer

A "balanced" increase in local revenue will mean level funding for both the county and school system if the Franklin County Board of Supervisors approve the recommended budget for 2012-13.

County Administrator Rick Huff presented the budget to the board Tuesday night, with few changes from a scenario he reviewed with the board two weeks ago.

The recommended budget includes:

- An increase in the real estate tax from 48 cents to 54 cents of each \$100 of assessed value (netting \$3.7 million).
- A hike in the personal property tax from \$2.04 to \$2.34 (netting \$1.3 million).
- An additional 10 cents on the machinery and tools tax (netting \$87,420).

- No amnesty on real estate tax interest (\$67,000).
- A hike in the landfill tipping fee from \$32 to \$37 (\$125,000).
- \$20 fee for participants in park and recreation programs (\$80,000)
- Increasing the tax collection rate from 95.5 percent to 96 percent (\$657,000)

Besides these increases, though, Huff said the county will still have to absorb some cost increases related to the Virginia Retirement System (VRS) and fuel and electricity costs.

The total proposed budget is \$120.9 million, compared to \$120.8 million for the current year. That small increase, about \$110,000, is due to mandatory social services costs.

The school system would see close to level funding for fiscal 2012-13, a total of \$77.2 million, or 64 percent of the overall budget. Of that money, about \$32 million is in local funding, the same as this year.

The school system has requested an increase of \$1.6 million above level funding for a pay increase for employees, but that is not included in the recommended budget

Huff said the recommended budget is \$6 million less than the budget for fiscal year 2008-09, reflecting cuts in state funding.

"That's a reduction of 4.75 percent in real dollars, not counting the increases that have been absorbed," he said.

The county has absorbed cuts and increased expenses by not filling 10 personnel positions and cutting budgets in every department and category, he said

For example, the county has decreased training/travel by 58 percent, machinery and equipment 72 percent, cell phone costs 15 percent, office supplies 28 percent and (outside) professional services 24 percent.

"We did not reduce any hours of being open or made any direct service cuts," Huff said. "Our people are doing more with less. We're trying to be as lean as we can be everywhere we can."

That's especially telling, he said, because of the county's \$36.2 million operating budget, \$26.6 million goes to services that are mandatory, and the county has little or no funding control over. Those services include law enforcement, public safety, comprehensive services, constitutional offices and juvenile detention.

The county has also maintained a stable fund balance, he said, as well as a continued high ranking with bond rating agencies.

The debt service has also remained low, Huff said, the lowest in the region with the exception of Henry County.

All of this has been during at time when the county has seen a population growth, up to more than 56,000, as compared to 53,000 in 2008.

That increase, Huff said, is manifested in higher demands for county services, from fire and rescue to library use, recreation and continued education services.

The county's business keeps picking up, he said, not slowing down.

When the budget process started, the county (including the school system) was facing an almost \$11 million shortfall. Most of that shortfall, about \$6.1 million is the result of the 2012 reassessment, that saw property values fall around the county by an average of 15.5 percent. In order to make up that difference, the county would have raise the real estate tax from the current 48 cents on each \$100 of

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assessed value to 57 cents.

But the board wanted a more balanced approach, prompting Huff to recommend raising the rate to 54 cents and adding the other revenue sources.

The school system's share of the shortfall was about \$3.2 million, but some of that can be made up in carryover funding.

However, Huff said it's unclear if the school system plans to use any carryover funding, which is usually reserved for one-time expenses, for ongoing expenses.

"The schools have not provided a line item budget for the public, the board or staff to analyze," he said. "Working from information provided, it appears that the school board has asked for \$4.2 million of revenue that will not recur next year to fund what appears to be expenses that will recur every year. This would represent a 15 percent increase over current county operational support."

Huff said that \$4.2 million did not show up as a number in the budget documents distributed to the board of supervisors last week when the school board requested \$1.6 million above level funding.

"None of the school system's request to use one-time carryover funding is included in the recommended budget," he said.

Huff is also recommending that the county absorb any extra costs of the increase in funding to the VRS. The state has mandated that employees contribute 5 percent more, and that they be given a raise to cover that cost.

Huff said a 5.7-percent raise would be needed to make sure employees do not see a decrease in pay because of the added cost of Social Security, Medicare and insurance deductions. The state is footing the bill for most of that increase, but Huff said it's still unclear how much will be left for the county to absorb.

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State still throwing curve balls

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Franklin County's proposed budget for fiscal year 2012-13 would provide level funding for both the county and school system, but make no mistake, many expenses will still have to be absorbed by both. As county Administrator Rick Huff has pointed out, the county and school system will operate with a budget that will be \$6 million less than it was in 2008-09. And that doesn't include all those increased expenses related to fuel, electricity and other costs that the county and schools have absorbed by cutting back. In fact, the county is busier than ever because the population keeps increasing.

Some may be opposed to the proposed tax increases and fees in the budget, but keep in mind, any further major cuts will have a direct impact on county services, as well as the quality of education. Also keep in mind that even with the proposed tax hikes, Franklin County still has one of the lowest rates in all of the tax categories in the region, and in the state for that matter. In other words, we are getting a lot of bang for our bucks from both the county and the schools.

But the budget process is continuing, and the board of supervisors and school board are having a joint meeting on Tuesday at 5 p.m. at the school board headquarters to further discuss budget details. Much of that discussion will probably center on how about \$1.5 million and other carryover funds can be used by the school system.

The state has yet again thrown a curve ball with the Virginia Retirement System. A requirement to increase employee contributions by 5 percent is awaiting the governor's signature. That could mean county and school employees would basically see a faux 5-percent raise since the money would basically pass through their paychecks and into the VRS. In fact, they would have to see a 5.7-percent pay increase just to break even in their take-home pay because of the money that has to be taken out for Social Security, Medicare and insurance. Although the state is helping foot part of that bill, it would still take yet another bite out of local funds during a time when localities have already been hit hard with unfunded mandates.

Both the county and school system are doing all they can to make sure no jobs are lost in this process. Staffs have already dwindled to the point everyone is doing more with less.

Let's hope this trend of the state balancing its own budget on the backs of localities soon ends. We simply cannot afford to keep going down this road.

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