



Bexar County Commissioners Court

San Antonio, Texas 78205-3036

210.335.2555

210.335.2926/fax

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Contact: Laura Jesse

210.787.9038/m

Proposed budget includes tax rate reduction, increased services

County Manager David Smith on Tuesday proposed a \$1.695 billion budget that includes a reduction in the county property tax rate as well as increased investments in public safety, criminal justice, neighborhood services and health and quality of life. The County is on the tail end of capital projects that were accelerated during the financial crisis of 2008 in an effort to save and create jobs in the community and take advantage of low financing costs. This budget turns a focus on expanded services to address more urban-like growth in the unincorporated areas.

Smith was able to propose Commissioners Court adopt a lower tax rate because the County has reduced expenditures by \$4.8 million in the current budget, which also started with a balance of \$8.7 million. Increases in ad valorem and other revenue of \$12.9 million resulted in a gain of \$26.4 million in the general fund. While the County Manager proposed a rate of \$.320683, Commissioners Court voted unanimously to lower the rate even further to \$.3145, a total decrease of 1.2 cents.

“We have rounded the corner in recovery from the economic recession,” County Judge Nelson Wolff said. “Our economy is strong as we see through the increase in our tax base, so I see cutting the tax rate as the only prudent thing to do for taxpayers.”

Public safety investments include the addition of 20 new law enforcement positions in patrol, the white-collar crimes and habitual offender units, courthouse security and professional standards and integrity. The budget also includes two new patrol substations on the east and west sides of the County at \$14 million total.

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Other public safety investments include enhanced technology for 911 Dispatch, upgrades to the City/County radio system, and safety equipment such as body armor, tasers and guns.

To address a recent influx in the jail population as an unforeseen consequence of the Michael Morton Act, the proposed budget includes funding for three intake prosecutors and three administrative staff to be added to the Criminal District Attorney's Office. The staff additions will help move felony cases more quickly through e-Discovery and ultimately the justice system. The Michael Morton Act removes barriers to accessing evidence collected by the State, but it also allows for broader discovery and thus far, an increase in the time to indictment for felony charges and an increase in the felony jail population.

Other justice system improvements include the creation of the Child and Family Court Division in the Civil District Courts. With the addition of the Baby Court to the Family Drug Court and two Child Abuse and Neglect Courts, the new division will help reduce the time of disposition on child abuse and neglect cases. A Criminal Public Defender's Office proposal will add two misdemeanor public defenders for County Court-at-Law No. 12 and one mental health public defender.

To increase services for mentally ill individuals in the criminal justice system, the budget provides funding to expand clinical assessments at the central magistrate office to 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The increased assessments will allow for more people to be diverted from jail and into treatment when appropriate.

"This is a really brilliant and long overdue move to get a Mental Health Department going," Commissioner Tommy Adkisson said. "The Mental Health Department has often been called the Bexar County Jail, so I'm proud of this court for making these changes to intercept the not-so-thoughtful actions of jailing those with mental health conditions instead of providing treatment."

To address a shortage of guardians identified by the Probate Courts, the budget proposes an enhanced program to provide three county staff positions to serve as guardians in the absence of family members or other willing individuals to serve as guardians to legally and functionally incapacitated individuals. This will help protect them from abuse, neglect and exploitation, and address the decrease in the availability of guardianship services in the County.

The proposed Neighborhood Support and Services Unit will include five positions to provide information to citizens and neighborhood groups regarding County services and processes, and to make appropriate referrals to citizens needing services from local, state, federal or other public agencies.

“As we see our unincorporated population increase and settle into more urban neighborhoods versus rural areas, we also see that there is general confusion about what the County can and cannot provide,” Smith said. “Part of this job will be educational; part of it will be helping people access services whether they are provided by the County or some other entity.”

Commissioners Court will have budget work sessions on Sept. 3, 9 and 15 to discuss the budgets of individual programs and departments; the final budget will be adopted and the tax rate set on Sept. 16.

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