



## **Bexar County Commissioners Court**

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### **New County budget lowers property tax rate, increases public safety**

Commissioners Court on Tuesday unanimously adopted the fiscal year 2014-15 budget, which includes a reduction in the property tax rate and increases funding for public safety, neighborhood services, and criminal justice. County Judge Nelson Wolff said the budget exemplifies an important change in the focus of Bexar County from the past couple years.

“During the recession and recovery, our budgets focused heavily on capital projects to keep our local economy growing while taking advantage of prime market conditions for financing the projects,” Judge Wolff said. “It is important to point out that while we used debt for the capital projects, we do not use debt for our operations. This is a very important budget, one that has made more significant strides in trying to address the growth in Bexar County.”

The \$1.69 billion budget includes a reduction in the property tax rate from \$.326866 to \$.3145, which is a decrease of 1.2 cents per \$100 valuation. The Court was able to adopt a lower tax rate because the County has reduced expenditures in the current budget, which also started with a positive balance. Increases in ad valorem and other revenue resulted in a gain of a little more than \$26 million in available funds within the general fund.

Public safety investments include the addition of 20 new patrol positions in the Bexar County Sheriff’s Office, as well as increases to law enforcement within the white-collar crimes and habitual offenders units, courthouse security and professional standards and integrity. Funding for two new patrol substations on the east and west sides of the County also is included.

“We’ve also taken steps to strengthen family units,” Judge Wolff said. “We’ve created a new division within Judge Peter Sakai’s court seeking to resolve some of the very difficult child abuse and neglect cases which can result in expensive litigation for the County. We also fund some 50 positions at Child Protective Services and we want greater accountability in terms of what they can do to salvage families.”

The new Family Based Safety Services (FBSS) pilot program in conjunction with Child Protective Services will use the Family Drug Court model to provide rehabilitative and support services to families who are most at risk for repeat participation in the FBSS program and who are in

danger of having their cases move on to the legal system for removal of the children from the home. The budget includes \$100,000 for this program, with the remainder of the funding to come from Child Protective Services and donations.

The budget also supports the creation of the Neighborhood Support and Services Unit, which will be staffed by one supervisor and four positions to provide information to citizens and neighborhood groups regarding County services and processes. With an ever growing population in the unincorporated areas, residents are seeking more assistance with sorting out the various roles of County government and finding services from local, state, federal or other public agencies.

Commissioner Paul Elizondo praised the adopted budget for rewarding the County's work force. A market study was conducted on the exempt pay table — primarily managerial, supervisory and professional positions — as was done in the previous fiscal year for the nonexempt pay table. These studies help bring the pay ranges more in line with other public and private sector agencies to keep County positions competitive in the local market. As a result of the study, the average salary increase for an employee on the exempt table is 7 percent; however, some employees may see more or less depending on their pay grade. For employees who do not receive an increase as a result of the study and for all non-exempt employees, the budget includes a 3 percent cost of living adjustment.

“By and large this is a fair budget to our employees, it rewards them for their hard work and keeps them level with the local job market,” Commissioner Elizondo said. “The cost of employees' health insurance also will remain the same — it's important for us to keep a good and strong workforce.”

Commissioner Tommy Adkisson, before voting on what is his final County budget, sounded an alarm about large commercial interests placing a burden on residential taxpayers by litigating their property appraisals, while the state shifts responsibilities to local governments.

“As proud as I am of our fiscal responsibility in Bexar County, it is important to note that we get 62 percent of our revenue from property taxes,” Commissioner Adkisson said. “We have gone the distance with the state of Texas to help them shore up things like transportation projects that we've taken on with pass-through financing; we're putting money into Child Protective Services — the list goes on.”

Adkisson said the County will need to work hard in the next legislative session to tighten up the appraisal process for commercial properties and to keep the state from shifting more responsibilities to local entities.

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