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**Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic, Bexar County Proposed Budget Includes  
No Tax Rate Increase for FY 2020-21**

*Proposed budget includes initiatives to aid in the economic recovery process.*

County Manager David Smith has presented the proposed budget for FY 2020-21 and is once again proposing to maintain the current tax rate of \$0.301097. If approved, this would be the 26<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in which Bexar County either lowers or maintains rates for property owners.

The proposed budget totaled \$1.78 billion for all funds, including \$678 million in operating appropriations, \$662.4 million in capital projects, \$152.2 million for debt service, and \$9.2 million for contingencies and \$279.4 million in reserves and carry-forward fund balance. The FY 2020-21 proposed budget for the general fund totaled \$556.7 million and compared to last year's budget of \$565.3 million, it demonstrates a decrease of \$8.6 million.

Based on certified appraised property values reported by the Bexar Appraisal District, values increased by 5.97 percent, or \$10.3 billion. Property values on existing properties increased by \$5.8 billion, and new construction generated \$4.5 billion in additional value.

To help combat the negative effects that COVID-19 had on the local economy, the County plans to increase funding for the development of a talented and available workforce with marketable skills. To aid in this effort, the County is partnering with local workforce agencies to help workers retrain and transition to new fields of employment.

In addition to partnering with other agencies, the proposed budget also recommends expanding on its Texas Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education (TX FAME) program. This program seeks to develop a local pipeline of trained Bexar County residents who, through class instruction and on-the-job training, are rapidly able to take skilled positions as advanced manufacturing technicians.

Incidences of domestic violence have increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been 24 family violence homicides so far in 2020; there were 24 in all of 2019. Family violence calls to the San Antonio Police Department increased in March by 18 percent when compared to March 2019.

To address these rising cases, the Protective Order Unit, part of the Family Justice Center, launched an online digital protective order system. The proposed budget provides for three new positions at a cost of \$173,460 to provide the long-term support for the system, in addition to the already approved \$500,000 from Coronavirus Relief Funds.

Complementing the Protective Order Unit, the proposed Civil Protective Order docket would more efficiently process requests for protective orders, which are accumulating rapidly. Funding in the amount of \$948,487 is proposed to fund 14 positions (four temporary) to implement this program and will allow the County to provide badly needed assistance and support for the victims of domestic violence and abuse.

For those facing incarceration or are incarcerated, the proposed budget includes \$3.4 million for expanded residential treatment and GPS services to help judges and magistrates continue to assist with jail population reduction. These programs will help with the short-term goal of keeping jail population low due to COVID-19. They will also build on the County's long-term goals of reducing recidivism through mental health and drug treatment.

The Office of Criminal Justice Planning estimates that these programs will provide alternatives to incarceration and treatment to 674 inmates each year, which will also help relieve staffing demands at the Adult Detention Center.

For the Constable's Offices, in FY 2020-21, workload is projected to decrease by 15 percent, even without considering the workload decreases attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to reduce the duplication of effort and unnecessary costs, it is recommended that the Constables be staffed to handle only civil process and bailiff services, with 38 Deputy Constable positions to be deleted for a savings of \$2.7 million.

To help mitigate the impact to individuals of this recommendation, it is recommended that the Sheriff's Office facilitate a shorter, more condensed version of its cadet class for Deputy Constables who want to apply for any of the 238 vacant detention officer positions in the Adult Detention Center.

The Bexar County Sheriff's Office, has also experienced the reduced need for Court Security personnel and temporary security personnel and it is recommended that nine vacant Law Enforcement-Court Services positions be deleted in FY 2020-21 for a savings of \$683,728 and funding in the amount of \$500,000, which was budgeted for part-time, temporary security personnel be eliminated.

There are currently seven law enforcement positions that have been vacant for over one year; some for over two years and it is recommended that these vacant positions be deleted. In addition, funding in the amount of \$808,198 was budgeted for 16 law enforcement patrol positions in FY 2019-20. These positions were to be made available to the Sheriff once all vacant detention officer positions were filled and overtime costs contained.

Because it is highly unlikely that all 238 vacant detention officer positions will be filled over the next fiscal year, it is recommended that funding for these 23 law enforcement positions be eliminated for FY 2020-21 for a savings of \$1.34 million.

Last year's approved budget included the County's new phasing approach to funding road projects. However, due to the uncertainty surrounding the future of the economy in Bexar County, new funding for capital projects will be deferred until Spring 2021 when the preliminary property value appraisal report will be released. At that time, the County will have a clearer picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted property values and the County's ability to pay for new projects.

There are several facility, road and flood control projects that were budgeted in FY 2019-20, with the intention to issue bonds to pay for them at the most fiscally advantageous point during the fiscal year.

The bond issuance did not occur prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. That being the case, it is recommended that these projects be paid for with cash on hand from TxDOT pass-through reimbursements and savings from completed and closed projects.

Although no salary increases or compensation enhancements (such as Cost of Living Adjustments) for employees are proposed for the upcoming budget, the County has proposed that out-of-pocket costs for health insurance for employees remain unchanged from Plan Year 2020.

Because interest rates on municipal bonds have reached historic lows during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Bexar County issued bonds to refund existing debt with new debt at lower rates, resulting in savings of about \$3 million per year in debt service costs.

As part of the refunding process, Bexar County was evaluated by all three bond ratings agencies. Despite the projected economic impact of COVID-19 on finances, the County and maintained its Triple-A ratings with stable outlooks. One of the most significant factors is the healthy cash reserve balance Commissioners Court has approved over the last several budgets. Additionally, the rating agencies cited the Court's conservative fiscal management practices.

In this challenging financial environment, the cooperation from all elected officials, appointed officials, department heads, and County staff has been essential in helping the County keep its finances on a sound footing, and in developing the FY 2020-21 proposed budget.

The proposed budget provides the framework to help the County navigate through the anticipated challenges during FY 2021 and to work together as a community to bring about our economic recovery.

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