

Albemarle Supervisors still undecided on several budget items
written by Newspark Team | April 7, 2015



The Albemarle County Board of Supervisors on Wednesday will enter a scheduled public hearing on the county's property tax rate still uncertain of the rate it will support.

"I am feeling uncomfortable making a decision on the tax rate until we have a second public hearing," Supervisor Diantha McKeel said at a budget work session Tuesday.

Supervisors voted in March to advertise a property tax rate of 82.4 cents per \$100 of assessed real estate property value. That's an increase that is 1.5 cents higher than had been recommended by County Executive Tom Foley.

The current tax rate is 79.9 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

The supervisors did decide to dedicate any one-time revenue that will be generated by a property tax rate to two of their initiatives.

"If you raise the tax rate, there will be additional funding that will come into the current fiscal year," said Lori Allshouse, county budget director.

The exact amount of the so-called one-time money will be determined by the property tax increase as well as a November audit of the county's accounts. Because the tax rate is set for the calendar year, an increase is retroactive to Jan. 1 in the middle of the fiscal year.

It was decided that some of that money will be used to supplement the county's Acquisition of Conservation Easements program.

However, Supervisor Kenneth C. Boyd did not support that decision.

"We're not putting enough dollars into the infrastructure our growth area," Boyd said. "We can protect our rural areas to make the necessary improvements to make our development area more attractive."

Foley had recommended adding no further money towards the ACE program after next year.

Supervisors also decided to move a 2.3 percent salary increase for general government employees to October rather than January at a cost of \$346,000. That will also be paid for using the one-time money.

However, supervisors did not prioritize other initiatives that were raised during a series of work sessions. These range from \$11,525 to fully fund a request from the Legal Aid Justice Center to \$184,150 to hire two additional traffic safety officers.

Foley said that there is just under \$500,000 of funds that supervisors can spend on these items without increasing the tax rate above the 80.9 cents he had recommended in his budget.

Supervisors also have additional money to put towards their initiatives because the school system's funding gap was lowered to \$500,000.

"The last time we were together it was \$750,000," Allshouse said.

However, supervisors decided to remove \$110,000 to help the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail apply for a crime-prevention program to reduce future prison populations.

The Center of Risk Reduction would be funded primarily by a \$335,000 grant from the federal Department of Justice. However, the Charlottesville and Albemarle were required to provide between \$110,000 and \$112,000 each this calendar year, and \$125,000 next year, to secure the necessary two-year contract with Florida-based Geo Group, a for-profit prison operator. Without the supplemental funding, the jail will lose the grant.

In March, the Charlottesville City Council unanimously agreed to fund its portion of the program as long as Albemarle agreed. Nelson County, which also uses the jail, opted out of the diversion center.

Supervisors also discussed whether to adopt the maximum tax rate and dedicate it to the county's capital improvement program. Foley's budget includes no funding for sidewalk construction, new parks infrastructure or schools moderation beyond next fiscal year.

Supervisor Jane Dittmar wants the board to consider other tools to raise money to pay for capital.

"We haven't had a [general obligation] bond referendum since the 1970's," Dittmar said. "That would prevent a tax increase."

However, Supervisor Liz Palmer said waiting for November 2016 to hold a bond referendum would mean that any projects that would be paid for with the proceeds would be delayed many years.

"If we do nothing now, we will have waited several years to do what we will need to do," Palmer said.

McKeel said she would like to review all the projects in the capital improvement program to see if they are still priorities of the current board.

"I'm not sure my priority would be to build a sidewalk down State Farm Boulevard," McKeel said. "What I'm trying to get at is what are the ramifications of putting this increase off another year?"

A committee will be formed this year to help advise supervisors on long-term financing of capital projects.

The public hearing on the tax rate is scheduled for 6 p.m. Wednesday in Lane Auditorium at the County Office Building on McIntire Road.

If supervisors do not make a decision on the budget Wednesday, they are slated to hold another work session at 3 p.m. April 14.