

All options are on the table in dealing with county's budget shortfall

Written by George Browning
Wednesday, 30 January 2013 00:00 -

All the cards are on the table and no stone will be left unturned are just two of the metaphors used to describe the county's approach in tackling a nearly \$329,000 budget shortfall in 2013.

The Washington County Council and the Washington County Commissioners held a joint meeting last Friday to discuss their options in dealing with the financial crisis.

The two groups discussed everything from forcing county employees to use furlough days to cutting staff.

In the end, the council found \$179,000 in a line-item that is normally used to handle the unexpected additional appropriations that are sure to come up throughout the year.

Even if they decided to use the money in that line item, there is still a \$161,000 shortfall.

Council President David Hoar said it's also possible to cut the plan commission's budget from \$15,000 to \$3,000, which is another \$12,000 off the shortfall.

There is another \$10,000 the council discussed taking from the two county judges.

The state pays the judges' salaries, but the county gives each judge a \$5,000 stipend. The council did not take action but decided to give the judges the option of coming to defend keeping that amount.

Hoar also asked the council if they'd be willing to work without pay.

"Do you want to work for free, the county council has a \$47,000 budget," he said.

Hoar said he is open to do that and Councilman Ben Bowling said he is as well, but that suggestion never picked up steam among the others.

The council also decided to have county departments that aren't already operating with a skeleton crew come to their meeting Feb. 4 to defend keeping positions.

After a lengthy discussion about all the different avenues the county could make, Hoar went through the budget and recommended the defending the positions.

"I will put the rough rip-wrap in the bottom of the ditch," he said. "As we we go through this, I know it's so unpopular, but as we went through the budget process we asked these departments to cut between 12 and 15 percent. Some of them accommodated that request and even went beyond that a little bit to help us out. One thing that wasn't touched and that was personnel. This is where the rubber meets the asphalt."

Hoar said he went through the budget and if the county reduces staff by nine and a half employees, that will generate \$303,578 dollars.

"Because we are the government, if we lay these people off, we are looking at unemployment, which comes out of our general (fund)," he said. "So that amount is not a clear \$303,578. I haven't figured up the exact amount."

Hoar said that would be the minimum.

"The other avenue I looked at was the reduction in some particular line items, plus I drew a straight line across positions that could be ruled out," he said. "That came up to 13 people, which is \$407,734, understanding that the unemployment thing is a factor to deal with."

A number of other options were discussed but no official decisions were made in addressing the shortfall.

The council has allotted six hours at their Feb. 4 meeting for those department heads to come before them to defend the positions.

In other business, the council and commissioners both agreed to allow Sheriff Claude Combs to fill an open position for a 911 dispatcher.

The position is not funded out of the county's general fund.

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Both groups also voted to fill two open positions within the county's highway department, which is funded through taxes generated from the sales tax on gas.

Even though the open positions don't have any bearing on the county's general fund, they do fall under the current hiring freeze put in place by the council at their regular meeting in December.

The freeze requires departments to come to the council before filling any open position within the county.

The county commissioner's next meeting will be Tuesday, Feb. 5.