

?County Council begins new year by tweeking budget

Written by

Tuesday, 06 January 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 06 January 2009 11:18

? The Washington County Council met in its first regularly scheduled meeting of 2009 with all members present. After one correction, the minutes of the previous meeting were approved unanimously.

The first item of business was for reorganization of the Council by way of electing a Council President and Vice-President. In a split vote, the Council elected Mark Manship as President and John Fultz as Vice-President.

The Council heard from Washington County Prosecutor, Dustin Houchin, who explained his efforts thus far to cut expenses by turning over the responsibility of bad check collections to a secretary rather than a deputy prosecutor. In addition, Houchin requested and received approval to distribute \$3,252 of state money into education and travel expense funds for Adult Protective Services.

Mark Nantz of Knapp, Miller, Brown Insurance spoke at Manship's request concerning the 75 percent increase in the employee cost of family medical insurance for county employees. According to Manship, the employee contribution rose from \$400 per month to \$700 per month.

Nantz explained that over the last several years, the county has not increased the employee contribution for dependent coverage. Furthermore, Nantz said that a 25 percent increase in the number of employees signing up for dependent coverage occurred in 2008. With the Council's decision at the end of last year to hold the line on the total insurance cost paid by the county and the across the board increase of 4.54 percent for medical insurance, the majority of the overall increase falls upon those employees electing to participate in the family insurance plan. The final decision on the subject rests with the Board of Commissioners but the Council members expressed concern that the 75 percent increase in one year would put too severe of a hardship on county employees. As part of the cost saving efforts, the Council voted to eliminate health insurance coverage for Council members.

In other business, the Council voted to fund one full time position in the Veterans Affairs Office (VAO). Prior to the first of the year, Madge Lyles was being paid as an employee of the Emergency Management Office (EMO) even though, by several accounts, she worked a significant part of her time in the VAO. Lyles' position in the EMO was eliminated last fall as part of an ongoing reorganization of the EMO after the September 14 hurricane.

Currently, Pat Rice who serves as the Veterans Affairs Officer works only three days a week. It will be up to the Board of Commissioners to determine if Lyles will be hired as a part time assistant to Rice.

During the discussion of how to fund the full time position in the VAO, it was determined that \$12,000 earmarked for a wheel chair accessible van would be transferred into a salary line item.

According to Manship, if a veteran meets certain criteria and is in a wheel chair, the Veteran's Administration (VA) will provide transportation from the veteran's home and back again from a VA facility. In light of the aforementioned VA program, the Council agreed that after reexamining the need for a wheel chair accessible van, it will be determined if the county should buy one.

Council member, Jim Nice, expressed concerns that the General Fund has a negative balance of approximately \$843,000. The discussion centered around strategies to bring the fund out of the red before the Board of Commissioners begins to consider claims for payment on January 7. Several ideas were floated but no action was taken.

The Council appointed Kathleen Zelivetz and Jim Davis to the Property Tax Assessment Board of Appeals after hearing recommendations from Washington County Assessor, Jason Cockerill.

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A special meeting was announced for Wednesday, January 21 in which both the Council and Commissioners will meet with Houchins to discuss county spending practices and the corresponding Indiana statutes.

With no further business to conduct, the Council adjourned until January 21. Its next regularly scheduled meeting is February 2.