

Budget Committee member bashes budgeting process

Front Page News

By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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A member of the Josephine County Budget Committee is lashing out against her colleagues and the county's budgeting process.

In a treatise sent to the Daily Courier, Margaret Goodwin takes issue with the way the county determines spending priorities, calling county departments "fiefdoms" that are insulated from budget cuts.

But county officials are pushing back, saying many services already have been cut to the bone and that priorities often are mandated by the state.

If Goodwin didn't like spending priorities, she missed her chance to voice specific concerns during recent meetings of the Budget Committee: She made no suggestions about where to make cuts.

In an interview with the Daily Courier, she explained that her suggestions last year were ignored and this year she had other priorities, an effort to change the process itself.

"I focused on a higher level," said Goodwin, a former accountant.

She lost, ultimately, on a 4-2 vote, with fellow committee member Jim Brumbach voting with her in an unsuccessful bid to hold an additional meeting to discuss budgeting philosophy.

Now Goodwin is hoping to influence next year's budget process.

"The public needs to know about this," she said. "If the public understands the issue, then if the public cares enough maybe some people will express an opinion."

Brumbach, although he voted with Goodwin to hold another meeting, later said he was "fairly satisfied" with the way things were.

"I already have a sense of what the priorities are," he said.

Committee member Steve Welch said Goodwin's ideas arrived too late to be considered by the committee. She brought up the topic April 19, at the committee's first of three meetings. The final meeting was last week.

"The feeling of the committee in general was it was way too late this year to start," Welch said.

"The problem is a general disagreement with what funds are available," he continued. "People, I think, want to say the money is available and they don't believe only the most essential services are being funded. I think it's really that kind of idea that Margaret's expressing."

Commissioner Keith Heck, also a Budget Committee member, characterized Goodwin's suggestions as a difference of opinion over budgeting philosophy.

Ironically, Goodwin is suggesting a return to a budget approach the county has used in the past, called "budgeting for outcomes," which focuses on funding top priorities first. Heck, Commissioner Simon Hare and Finance Director Arthur O'Hare said that, in the four years since the method was used, the county's priorities have not changed so there is no need to reset them.

"Arthur will tell you, basically, we are doing that (budgeting for outcomes)," Heck said.

O'Hare agreed.

"We're not doing it (budgeting for outcomes) because we don't need to reinvent the wheel," he said. "We went through the process. Our priorities are the same."

"The whole theory that we should reassess our priorities this year is Margaret's personal opinion," O'Hare said. "The Board (of Commissioners) already knows we are putting our money in the most important places."

O'Hare added that he took as "pretty offensive" Goodwin's comments during deliberations that she believed the county was not following generally accepted accounting practices.

The state requires they be followed, he said. He also said the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada for the fourth year in a row had given the county a Distinguished Budget Presentation Award, the latest for the budget covering the current fiscal year.

The budget for the fiscal year beginning in July was approved by the Budget Committee 5-1 on May 17, with Goodwin dissenting. On Wednesday, commissioners also approved it. The county's three commissioners sit on the six-member Budget Committee.

Goodwin made a name for herself last year and this spring by suggesting that federally funded road money be put to use for patrol deputies. The issue was debated, but money instead has been banked.

Last year, she said, she questioned spending but was ignored.

"Because of the response, I didn't do that this year," she said. "I found some significant things, but I didn't bring those up because there were bigger fish to fry."

"You fund the 'must-haves' first, then the 'should haves' and, if there's any money left over, you fund the 'nice to haves,'" she said. "In county budgeting, the 'must haves' are the mandated services, but the level at which you fund them is also important."

"Simply asking the department heads how much it costs to fund a mandated service is the easiest way to decide how much it costs, but there are always savings that can be realized by requiring justification for each expense."

In preparing the budget for the coming fiscal year, commissioners directed managers to budget for service levels similar to this year, and directed that those services only be those that are mandated or self-supporting.

O'Hare called the coming year's budget "status quo," as far as service levels are concerned, comparing this year to next year, although spending is about 5 percent higher than this year's budget: \$90 million, up from \$86 million. The vast majority of this money comes from state and federal sources, and must be spent as dictated by those sources.

Goodwin, in her statement, said status quo budgeting insulated departments from cuts.

"Status quo budgeting looks at each department as its own fiefdom, with its own inviolate budget, which is protected from being drawn upon to meet higher priority requirements in other areas of government," she said.

In an interview with the Daily Courier, Goodwin also faulted the committee's schedule, saying not enough time was allowed to review the budget.

"This is not an actual budget review," she said. "We look at PowerPoints and congratulate department heads."

Goodwin could have had more influence on how meetings were run, but declined a nomination to serve as chairwoman of the committee. She said she instead wanted to focus on advocacy.

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