

County budget would cost most more in taxes

Only Winfield is slated to avoid increase

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Union County's proposed budget would raise taxes for residents in every town except Winfield if adopted, according to tax figures released by the county tax administrator last week.

Under the \$436.8 million spending plan, most towns would see an increase of less than \$100 for the average homeowner, while eight municipalities would see a three-figure hike.

The biggest dollar increase would be seen in Westfield, where the average household would see its county tax bill raised by \$176. Hillside residents, meanwhile, would see their average bills jump \$130, or 13 percent.

Only Summit, which saw the largest county tax increase last year, would see a negligible bump of about \$2 for the average household. Winfield, where the homeowners association is the sole taxpayer, would see no increase.

The tax calculations were met with dismay from some local officials, who encouraged the county freeholders to follow the state's lead and start looking at deeper spending cuts.

"I think Union County has got to do a better job," said Westfield Mayor Andrew Skibitsky, noting that county taxes have surpassed municipal taxes in his town. "It's not like all our residents are awash in disposable incomes. They're watching their budgets very carefully, and it's time for the county to do so also."

The 2008 budget, proposed by county Manager George Devaney on Feb. 14, raises overall taxes by \$15.4 million in order to accommodate \$22 million in new spending. Devaney attributed much of the spending increase to built-in costs such as insurance premiums, pension contributions and contractual raises for county workers. The budget would also allow the county to hire 51 new corrections officers at the Union County Jail, a cost the county hopes to recoup through decreases in overtime expenses.

The spending plan will be vetted by the freeholder board during a series of budget hearings over the next two months. Freeholder Rick Proctor said he understands the increase in mandated costs but hopes to find cuts before the budget comes to a vote.

"I don't think we're really going to be comfortable with any budget increase given the state of the economy we have right now," Proctor said. "I have to think of this as the starting point and we go down."

Freeholder Chairman Angel Estrada agreed that the board will be looking for cuts. He said the freeholders will examine ways to reduce overtime expenses, and evaluate new projects to determine whether they are affordable in 2008. However, he said it is too early to discuss specific cuts.

"Am I happy with a 6.5 percent increase? No, I'm not and we're going to do everything to reduce that number," Estrada said. "It is our intention to reduce overall spending, but unfortunately many factors are working against us."

In Clark, county taxes for the average homeowner are expected to increase by \$164, the second-largest increase in the county. But Mayor Sal Bonaccorso said the projects and services provided by the county are worth the money.

"We've done very well in getting back a lot of the dollars we've paid into the county, so I'm not going to scream about it," said Bonaccorso, adding that he is raising municipal taxes slightly this year as well. "It's very easy to throw snowballs at anyone proposing a budget, but unfortunately in the state of New Jersey I don't know anyone who's staying the same or going down. We're all going up."

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