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El Dorado deals with budget gap

County may close a museum, eliminate bookmobile services and add a user fee to cell phone bills.

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Museum and bookmobile services might be curtailed and a surcharge added to cell phone bills as part of El Dorado County's efforts to close a projected \$15.6 million budget gap in the coming fiscal year.

Laura Gill, county chief administrative officer, outlined several potential cost-saving measures, including work force reductions, during last week's Board of Supervisors meeting. Those identified so far would reduce the shortfall by about \$9.5 million, she said

Gill will make a formal recommendation Tuesday.

A midyear budget report issued in January anticipates shortfalls in several general fund revenue sources, due in part to the downturn in the housing market and the state's budget crisis.

Property tax revenues for 2007-08 are expected to fall \$305,000 short of projections. Supplemental property taxes – based on the difference between a property's assessed value on the date of sale or new construction and the assessed value the previous Jan. 1 – are expected to be about \$1.35 million less than budgeted. A \$711,777 shortfall in property transfer taxes also is anticipated, as well as a \$763,708 shortfall in sales tax revenue.

Gill said meetings with staff members had yielded several cost-cutting proposals and at least one idea for generating additional revenue.

"A number of departments identified golden handshake opportunities," Gill said. She noted, however, that the retirement incentive programs have been met with some ambivalence in the past.

The program could be used to achieve vacancies and allow the county to cut positions without layoffs, she said.

A three-day closure of county offices between Christmas and New Year's Day also would save about \$650,000, Gill said.

Reducing fixed asset purchases is proposed for a savings of \$745,000, and consolidating Development Services and Department of Transportation operations in El Dorado Hills in one building would save about \$250,000, she said.

In addition, Gill said, Sheriff Jeff Neves suggested creating a new revenue source for the department's dispatch center through a fee on cell phone use.

The fee would be similar to state and federal surcharges on cell phone bills and would generate about \$1.5 million annually, Gill said, adding that such fees are standard nationwide.

Gill said cuts in discretionary services, those not required by state law, may be necessary as well.

Savings could be achieved by closing the county Historical Museum and eliminating the library's bookmobile service, she said.

Other ideas include reducing the \$110,000 general fund subsidy to county airports and freezing the county's promotions budget at the 2008 level.

Gill said the board also could revisit a proposal, considered during 2007-08 budget hearings, to cut five

positions in the Assessors Office. Two of the positions were vacated through golden handshakes.

But Assessor Tim Holcomb said the current housing market has increased demands on his office. People are calling and asking that their property be reassessed to reflect declining home values.

"We need staff to do that," Holcomb said.

He recommended reducing the number of temporary employees, though he said extra help is necessary on a seasonal basis in some departments.

Supervisor Ron Briggs suggested re-evaluating general fund allocations for contracts that have not been executed.

Supervisor Norma Santiago also requested an update on the status of environmental studies related to various general plan implementation projects. Board members have suggested some studies might have to be postponed because of budget constraints.

Gill said earlier this month that she had encountered some skepticism among staff members about the severity of the budget crisis.

"I have some folks believing this is not real, or that it is short term," she said. "I don't believe this is short term."

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