

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ContraCostaTimes.com

Contra Costa County: Public safety cries foul over budget cuts

By Malaika Fraley and Lisa Vorderbrueggen
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 05/03/2011 04:42:12 PM PDT

Updated: 05/04/2011 09:07:29 AM PDT

MARTINEZ -- Public safety leaders expressed grave concerns about the fallout from next year's budget. Contra Costa County leaders unanimously adopted Tuesday that would end gang injunction plans, certain sex offender registration enforcement and "zero tolerance" enforcement of domestic violence.

The nearly \$50 million in cuts from the \$1.2 billion county spending blueprint will lead to service cuts across the board.

But officials from the district attorney, sheriff and probation offices say that it contains disproportionate cuts to their departments and will put county residents at risk.

Those public safety departments are losing 82 positions under the new budget that calls for the elimination of 138 county jobs in all. Not every position is filled, however, so the number of layoffs will be fewer.

"There are 10 pages of layoff lists and five are for public safety -- the district attorney, probation and sheriff," District Attorney Mark Peterson said. "There are no layoff pages in the health department, in fact they are adding positions.

"They say there's no money. The truth is there is money, they just chose to spend it differently than how I would spend it."

The budget tension between public safety and the health department is a long-standing one, exacerbated by dwindling dollars and a fifth year of cuts.

But the county cannot easily exchange the dollars it spends on public health with those it earmarks for

deputies

or prosecutors, said Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond.

For every \$1 the county spends on health and human services, it receives \$4 in federal and state dollars. Cutting \$1 million from that portion of the budget, in other words, would result in the loss of \$5 million in health and human services.

A \$1.4 million budget shortfall to the district attorney's office means it has to eliminate nine attorneys and three inspectors, which would leave 78 prosecutors for a county that is third in the state for homicides per capita. The cuts would leave 20 percent fewer attorneys than the office had in 2005.

Without an adequate staffing level, Peterson says the office plans to abandon its "zero tolerance policy" on domestic violence, and so some batterers who would have been aggressively prosecuted on felony charges will more likely get slapped with a misdemeanor or not be charged at all.

Child molesters and rapists who are not registering as sex offenders are going to be prosecuted for misdemeanors, rather than felonies. Misdemeanor prosecutions overall are expected to decline.

Plans to implement crime prevention programs that would dismantle criminal street gangs, boost attendance in schools, and to help the homeless and jobless re-enter society have been officially scrapped this year, Peterson said.



DIRECTV has more of what you want to watch!

Switch today!

1-888-778-0985

NO EQUIPMENT TO BUY!
NO STARTUP COSTS!

Offer ends 2/29/11. Credit card required (except in MA & PA). New approved customers only (lease required). \$19.95 Handling & Delivery fee may apply. Applicable use tax adjustment may apply on the retail value of the installation. Call for details.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

doing the jobs of three people, working thousands of hours of unpaid overtime a year, with minimal support staff in what's become the most underfunded district attorney's office in the Bay Area since he took the job 20 years ago.

"Why is it the most important law enforcement hinge in our system has to take the biggest pay cut, staffing cut and budget cut?" Cope asked. "Why do I have to make a 12 percent cut in my salary for a 3.4 percent cut in the county budget?"

"I had to unplug a toilet here the other day," Cope said. "I'm a lawyer, for goodness sake."

The Sheriff's Office is poised to lose 40 deputies, which means emergency calls will receive a slower response.

The probation department warns that there is no way it can supervise hundreds of youth and adult probationers with a decimated staff.

Despite the pleas from public safety and other departments slated to lose dollars, the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors on Tuesday rejected calls for shifts in how it allocates dollars among the departments or the use of reserves.

For years, law enforcement has had its eye trained on the county hospital, which will receive \$41 million from the general fund next year. Peterson called it an unaffordable subsidy that has been blessed with \$616 million from the county since 1995.

"You want a Rolls-Royce in public health, and we can only afford a Honda Accord," Peterson said to the board.

Gioia rejected Peterson's analysis on several fronts.

The county is legally required to provide health care for the poor, Gioia said. It could contract with a private hospital for that care rather than operate a county-owned system, but it is unclear whether it would save the taxpayers money.

"The hospital is also part of the county's emergency medical response system, which is very much a part of public safety," Gioia said.

fast facts: public safety budget

directed at public safety:

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: No more "zero tolerance policy" for domestic violence crimes, felony prosecutions of out-of-compliance sex offender registrants, anti-gang programs, re-entry programs for ex-convicts.

SHERIFF: Elimination of up to 40 deputies, which will curtail the number and types of calls law enforcement will respond to.

PROBATION: Sharply reduced supervision of offenders after release.

Source: Contra Costa County