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Mike Cooper
Dave Gossett
John Koster
Dave Somers
Brian Sullivan

County Council Approves 'Painful' Budget for 2009

Universally lamenting the necessity for cutting jobs and reducing services in the face of declining revenues brought on by the widespread economic crisis, the Snohomish County Council has approved a 2009 general fund budget of \$206.6 million. The council used a combination of expenditure reductions and revenue enhancements to close the \$21 million gap that existed between the 2009 projected revenues and the cost to continue 2008 general fund services in 2009.

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Approximately 160 employee positions are being eliminated, although the actual number of employees losing jobs will be less because the council instituted a hiring freeze last summer.

Seventy-two percent of the county's general fund supports law and justice services, including the sheriff, prosecutor, courts and corrections, and these important and large departments had to absorb equivalently large budget cuts. Smaller non-public safety departments – assessor, auditor, treasurer, parks, human service, the executive and the council will also have to cope with significant cuts next year. Internal services departments such as facilities and technology services were equally impacted.

The county's combined general and non-general budget for 2009 is \$815.4 million, compared to the adopted 2008 budget of \$883.5 – a reduction of approximately \$68 million, or about 7.7 percent overall.

"We're not out of the woods yet," said Council Chair Dave Somers. "If the economy doesn't get better soon, further budget reductions may be necessary. It will be difficult, but I look forward to working closely with employees and the unions to meet future challenges."

Somers noted that during the budget preparation process 166 county employees submitted several hundred budget-reducing suggestions to the council. "Employee input was very valuable and very appreciated," said Somers.

On a brighter note, Somers said the council's 2009 budget:

- Continues support for Project Self Sufficiency;
- Maintains support for Senior Centers and Family Support Centers;
- Increases support of the Health District over the executive's proposal;
- Initiates within the Parks Department recreational programs for children with special needs;
- Supports the proposed Human Rights Commission with existing staff;
- Funds the development of a county-wide farm preservation program;
- Funds newly hired deputies who have already received academy training;
- Establishes a new initiative for the renovation and modernization of the fairgrounds;
- Identifies new efficiencies in the criminal justice system that are anticipated to result in increased revenue from the county jail while simultaneously reducing expenses;

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- Maintains the existing commitment to early childhood education through the ECEAP program;
- Accelerates design and construction of critical road projects;
- Continues the successful Drug Court Program;
- Restores two animal control officer positions;
- Restores the inmate labor program;
- Institutes a program to use Planning & Development Services employees for Public Works projects which had previously been contracted out;
- Preserves the Fairgrounds Manager position; and
- Does not increase the general property tax levy.

“We asked every department to share the pain,” said Council Vice-Chair Mike Cooper, “including the executive and council offices.”

Cooper stressed the council’s open, public process in preparing its budget, noting that since the council received the executive’s budget recommendations on September 4, the council has conducted more than 37 hours of open public meetings and hearings dedicated solely to discussing and receiving input regarding the budget.

One hundred and nineteen people who attended the council’s public meetings and hearings testified in person and an additional 703 people submitted written comments in hardcopy or electronic form, including 166 county employees.

“By working closely with the independent county elected officials and county employees,” said Councilmember Dave Gossett, “we received many creative ideas to preserve front-line services and reduce layoffs.”

The job of producing a balanced 2009 budget that includes adequate reserve funds, he added, was made much more difficult after the council recently learned that County Executive Aaron Reardon had spent down the county’s existing reserves by \$6.2 million.

Councilmember Brian Sullivan said he was particularly pleased that the council budget maintains the county’s ongoing contribution to the cash-strapped Snohomish Health District and added \$229,000 above the executive’s recommendation. The additional funding, he said, allows the health district to continue many important programs, including the visiting nurses program and the First Choices program that provides counseling services for young mothers.

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