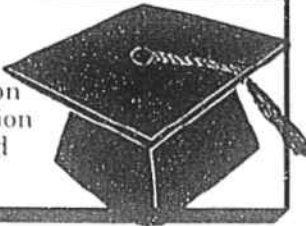


Donning Caps, Gowns

Approximately 550 seniors will graduate soon from Brunswick County's high schools. Section D features photographs of the graduates and related stories.



Fishermen Mark Firsts

A pier fisherman snags the first king of the season while, offshore, the first marlin's hooked and released. The weekly Fishing Report's on Page 11-B.

M-o-o-ving On Up

A cooperative cow helps the West Brunswick High School Band reach its fund-raising goal Saturday at Moo Doo Day. The story's on Page 10-A.



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Stalking The Marsh

At dusk Saturday a solitary heron stalked the marsh of Calabash Creek on N.C. 179.

STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

County Building Needs Could Hike Tax Rate

BY RAHN ADAMS

Brunswick County taxpayers can expect to see their property taxes jump in the coming year, if commissioners undertake what County Manager John T. Smith this week called an "ambitious major capital improvement program" in his budget message.

Monday night in Bolivia, Smith formally presented his 1989-90 budget proposal to commissioners. The \$33 million model budget—which is almost \$6 million more than the budget approved last June for the current fiscal year—includes a 10-cent tax rate increase to 64½ cents per \$100 of property valuation.

Six projects make up the five-year, \$17.95 million to \$20.1 million capital improvement program, whose individual parts have been discussed by county officials for several months. Some \$3.8 million of the proposed increase would go to the program in the coming year.

The projects include a new elementary school near Supply, a 911 emergency telephone system facility, a new Social Services building, an addition to the county jail, water system improvements and expansion of the land records management department.

While they made no comments on the model budget during the meeting, commissioners indicated afterwards that they feel a tax hike is unavoidable because the capital pro-

jects are so pressing. "Ten cents is a lot, but the need is there," said Commission Chairman Frankie Rabon.

Commissioner Benny Ludlum said he could "live with" Smith's proposed budget, "but if they (other commissioners) start tearing it apart with their political promises, I'm not for any of it."

Calling the proposal a "very conservative budget," Commissioner Kelly Holden pointed out that the capital expenditures account for most of the proposed increase, and several of the projects—including the jail addition and DSS building—are state-mandated.

Commissioner Gene Pinkerton, however, indicated he feels the model isn't conservative enough. "I think there are still some more cuts that can be made in the administrative part of the budget," he said.

Pinkerton said he plans to propose steps to further reduce spending and personnel at the board's first budget workshop next week. Rabon said up to 20 county jobs could be deleted, but did not identify where the cuts might be made.

The workshops will be held May 22 and May 23 in the Administration Building, with both sessions starting at 6:30 p.m. Also, a public hearing on the proposed budget is scheduled for May 30 at 7 p.m., in the Public Assembly Building.

Despite the proposed budget increase, 32 county departments—including three new ones—would be expected to operate on almost \$175,000 less than they were budgeted last year, according to Smith.

The proposed new departments are: Engineering, with a suggested allocation of \$79,408; Purchasing, \$29,980; and the Transportation Steering Committee, \$7,790.

Smith said the new departments would require only two new employees—presumably an engineer and purchasing agent, since officials have said the transportation committee will not require a full-time staff.

The county manager has recommended increases totaling \$923,718 over the current budget for the public school system (current expense and capital outlay), Brunswick Community College (capital outlay), Social Services, Aging, Public Health and Mental Health.

Another substantial increase was noted in the county's debt service, which is expected to rise by almost \$850,000 in the coming year. The model budget allocates more than \$6 million, or 18 percent of the total budget, for debt service.

Smith said the proposed budget does not reflect a cost of living salary increase for county employees, although it does include money for

(See COUNTY, Page 2-A)

Sunset Beach Council May Cut Tax Rate

BY DOUG RUTTER

For the first time in years, Sunset Beach Councilmen have the option of slashing the town tax rate, improving services or a combination of the two.

Town officials learned of their enviable position Tuesday evening during their first budget workshop of the year. Another has been set for Tuesday, May 30, at 4:30 p.m. in town hall.

The town is in such good financial shape because projected revenues in the general fund for next fiscal year will exceed anticipated expenses by approximately \$140,000. The unappropriated fund balance from past years makes another \$140,000 available.

Present for this week's 1½-hour meeting were Councilmen Al Odom, Minnie Hunt and Mary Katherine Griffith and Mayor Mason Barber. Board members Ed Gore and Kathy Peed were absent.

Given the available revenues, options of cutting the town tax rate of 16.7 cents per \$100 of valuation or leaving the rate intact and allocating money for projects such as sidewalks and parking were both proposed. Council members also talked about

following both plans to a lesser extent.

Mrs. Hunt, finance officer for the town, said she favored a significant cut in the tax rate, possibly to as low as 12.5 cents. The town tax rate stood at 12.7 cents two years ago before it was increased by some 25 percent to the current rate.

Mayor Barber said considering a tax cut is good, but he urged the board to also look at special projects that would improve the town. "For once, it looks like we got some money," he said. "I really think now is the time to move on some things if we have the money."

In the proposed budget for fiscal year 1989-90, general fund revenues total \$582,791. Property taxes would account for approximately \$290,000 based on the existing tax rate, a 95 percent collection rate and a property valuation of nearly \$183 million.

Other anticipated revenues include \$54,800 in state sales tax, \$28,000 in Powell Bill money and \$21,000 for the utilities franchise tax. Town officials also expect about \$100,000 in occupancy tax revenues next year.

General fund expenditures total

\$442,950 under the proposed budget. Major costs include \$170,000 for the police department, \$75,000 for streets and nearly \$65,000 for administration.

Capital expenses tentatively budgeted for next year include purchase of a new police car and a four-wheel-drive vehicle at approximately \$25,000 total and construction of a \$21,000 beach access ramp at the end of Third Street for handicapped persons.

Also proposed is the addition of a new position in the streets department at an approximate cost of \$16,000.

All town employees would get 5 percent raises under the proposed budget, and some would get additional 2½ percent merit increases.

Town council is also considering offering the state's 401-K retirement plan to all employees, allocating an additional 5 percent of each employee's salary for a retirement fund. Municipalities are already required to offer a similar plan for police officers.

Because of the extra funds on hand, council members also mentioned this

week the possibility of increasing donations to the local volunteer fire and rescue squads. This year, the town gave \$10,000 to Sunset Beach VFD and \$5,000 to Calabash Volunteer EMS.

In the water fund, the most notable item proposed is \$120,000 for capital outlay. That would allow for the completion of three water line projects.

The tentative budget also includes \$27,000 for sanitation. While the town operates its own, small, sanitation department, council is considering contracting trash pickup with the firm that serves Ocean Isle Beach, Holden Beach and Shallotte.

Council members spoke at length Tuesday evening with representatives of Chambers of South Carolina and asked the firm to bring a sample contract to the next budget session.

One year of service with the contractor would cost the town about \$38,000, or approximately \$11,000 more than the town can do the work in-house.

The Chambers price is based on twice weekly pickup during the summer (See SUNSET, Page 2-A)

Manager Recommends Dropping Director's Post

Although a Brunswick County department head who pleaded guilty last month to forging a county check remains suspended, the post she holds may not be funded in the coming year's budget.

County Manager John T. Smith told the Beacon Monday night that Computer Services Director Regina M. McKeithan was still on suspension without pay. However, he noted that the proposed budget he presented to commissioners earlier Monday does not include a director's position in Computer Services.

Mrs. McKeithan was relieved of her duties in early February, when she was accused of forging a county check last May to buy \$50,667.63 in unauthorized computer equipment for her department. She pleaded guilty last month in Brunswick County Superior Court and received a suspended sentence.

Smith indicated in February that Mrs. McKeithan's employment hinged on the outcome of her court case. However, after Mrs. McKeithan's guilty plea and sentencing, Smith said she would remain suspended without pay until commissioners reviewed her case.

The board announced no action after Mrs. McKeithan met with them for 45 minutes during an executive session on May 1. Smith was excluded from the closed-door conference.

The county manager's proposed budget, which was delivered to commissioners last week and was formally presented to them at Monday's meeting, recommends that salaries and wages in Computer Services be cut from \$43,198 in the current budget to \$18,790 in the coming fiscal year. The department head had requested \$46,628 for salaries and wages for the two-person staff.

Smith confirmed that the deletion represents the funding for the director's position. However, he would not say if his budget recommendation indicates that he plans to dismiss Mrs. McKeithan prior to the start of the fiscal year on July 1.

Holden Officials Go To Raleigh To Correct Height Limit Bill

BY DOUG RUTTER

Following a special trip to Raleigh Tuesday, Holden Beach Mayor John Tandy said he feels confident a bill pending in the state legislature will restrict the height of buildings on the island as the town intends.

The mayor and four of the five town board members drove to the state capitol Tuesday morning to meet with local representatives about the bill, which would limit the building height on the island to 35 feet.

Town Manager Gus Ulrich and Town Attorney Doug Ledgett also made the trip to speak with State Rep. David Redwine and Sen. R.C.

Soles about the bill, which has created some unrest on the island since it was discovered last summer that a version ratified last summer was different than that requested by the town board.

The original House Bill 2324 ratified last June effectively limited the height of buildings at Holden Beach to 35 feet, but allowed the town board of commissioners to change the limit simply by adopting an ordinance.

Town officials had requested last May that the bill require a referendum of voters, initiated either by the town board or island residents, to change the height restriction.

After discovering in early April that there were discrepancies in the ratified law and draft proposal, town officials requested that Redwine amend the bill to include the referendum clause.

The representative then incorporated the Holden Beach request in House Bill 927, a similar height limit bill that he had introduced for the Town of Long Beach.

Although it featured a referendum clause, the bill also included a provision that allowed the town board to change the height limit without a referendum.

That version of the bill passed through the state House of Representatives early last week, just days

before a legislative deadline. Most bills had to have gained the approval of at least one house of the state legislature no later than May 11 to have a chance of passage this year.

Redwine said this week that changes in the bill requested by the town will be made before it is approved by the Senate. The revised bill will then have to come back before the House for its approval.

"It will be changed to reflect the kind of wording they want," said Redwine. "We had deadlines, and I had to get it through one house before it could be changed."

In addition to deleting the clause that would enable the town board to

change the height limit through adoption of an ordinance, town officials only want the bill to apply to the island.

Redwine said the final version of the bill will be worded in a manner so that any area north of the inland waterway that is annexed would not fall under the height restriction. He said the annexation clause would not apply to Long Beach unless town officials there request it.

Mayor Tandy said some property owners in the mainland area being considered for annexation by the town have objected to the 35-foot height limit. Redwine also said he received one call from a mainland

resident opposed to the bill.

If the town proceeds with annexation, it will probably do so within the next six weeks.

Despite the problems town officials have had with the bill, Tandy said this week he does not believe any of the mixups were intentional.

He said the lack of communication between the two parties was good in one respect because it allowed the town to exclude from the bill any mainland areas that may be annexed.

In a telephone call from Redwine's office Tuesday afternoon, Tandy said, "I'll probably sleep a lot better when I get home."