



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

Leading The Way

Leading the West Brunswick High School Class of '92 across M.H. Rourke Stadium and along the track following graduation on June 2 are junior marshals (front to back) Emily Gore, Amy Caison, Dorothy Blackburn, Keith Holden, Sean Hughes, Kristy Poulos and not visible, Hope Varnam.

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS VOTED MONDAY

Raises For Two Departments Slashed

BY ERIC CARLSON

Employees of the Brunswick County Sheriff's and Register of Deeds' departments lost half their expected 5 percent pay raise Monday when the county commissioners voted to withhold the pay hikes pending a personnel study of all county departments.

The proposed county budget had included a 2.5 percent across-the-board pay hike for all county employees and a lump sum payment to the sheriff and the register of deeds that would provide a uniform salary increase of 5 percent in those departments.

In adopting the final budget Monday, the board approved the raise for county employees but not for the other two departments.

The county commissioners appropriate funds for the sheriff and register of deeds, but cannot set pay scales for their departments because they are independently elected officials.

After a motion by Chairman Kelly Holden, the board voted 4-1, with Commissioner Frankie Rabon dissenting, to withhold half the money earmarked for salaries in the sheriff's department and register of deeds budgets. In putting the raises on hold, the commissioners told County Manager David Clegg to arrange for a reclassification study of county positions and salaries to begin as soon as possible.

The personnel study is expected to take at least 60 days. The board agreed to abide by its salary recommendations and to give the sheriff's and register of deeds' departments the remainder of their salary allocation after pay adjustments are made in other county departments.

County Manager David Clegg said Tuesday that he hopes to contract for the study to begin next month. He said it would take at least 60 days to complete. Any salary adjustments recommended by the study probably would not be implemented until Jan. 1, he said. The remaining salary money for the sheriff and register of deeds would not be made available until then.

"I think if we give it to them right now it wouldn't be fair to the other departments," Holden said at the budget meeting.

Clegg said that while the allocations to the two departments were based on an across-the-board salary increase, the two elected officials are free to give merit raises or to set pay scales any way they choose. After the withheld money is disbursed, the sheriff and register of deeds could increase salaries retroactively.

"The sheriff can give it all to one person or to two people or he can keep it for himself if he wants to," Clegg said.

The vote to withhold the salary allocation came at the end of a discussion initiated by Rabon, who asked the board to consider a 5-percent raise for all county employees. He said that due to increased insurance premiums, many employees would see a net decrease in their take-home pay.

County Personnel Officer Margaret Grissett said some employees would see a bigger increase in their paychecks if they chose to take part a flexible spending account that will be available July 1. Under the set-aside program, fixed expenses such as medical payments and day-care bills could be taken out of paychecks before deductions, thereby reducing taxable income.

Commissioner Gene Pinkerton said that instead of an across-the-board pay hike, any increase in county salaries should be based on job performance.

"There are a lot of employees here that could stand a 50 percent increase, including those deputies," Pinkerton said. "I wouldn't do their job for twice the money. There should be some way to reward people for doing a better job than others."

Rabon disagreed, saying employee raises should be based on the assumption that they are doing a good job. Those who aren't should be dismissed, he said.

Although he eventually voted in favor of Holden's motion, Pinkerton said the sheriff's and register of deeds' departments should not be "penalized 60 days" while the personnel study is being done.

Sheriff John Carr Davis said he did not want his department to be included in the study. "I wouldn't mind being part of a study as long as it's done by position and not personality," Davis told the board Monday.

Sunset Beach Eyes No Change In Tax Rate For Next Budget

BY SUSAN USHER

Sunset Beach Town Council is proposing no change in its 16.7-cent tax rate for the coming year and few changes in its budget.

At their 7:30 p.m. June 15 meeting, council members are expected to put polishing touches on the \$1.31 million budget and set a date for a public hearing. It must be adopted by the start of the new fiscal year July 1.

The budget is based on a property valuation of \$186.8 million, up from \$171.5 million a year ago, reflecting recent annexation activity and other growth. Major revenue sources include approximately \$300,000 in property tax collections and approximately \$250,000 in occupancy tax revenues. This year the town has received, through June 3, \$230,000 from the tax on visitor accommodations, while it had only budgeted \$150,000.

The proposed general fund budget is roughly \$714,000, about \$84,000 less than this year; and the water fund budget, \$600,940, up from \$563,000.

"It won't change much," Mayor Mason Barber predicted, after the full council studies it.

Barber and Councilmen Julia Thomas, Cheri Cheek and Bud Scramton met last Thursday night for a work session on the budget, but said the full council needed to review the document before it went to public hearing.

As of Tuesday, no date for a second budget workshop under consideration had been announced.

One issue raised in the budget workshop for consideration by the council was a request from the Sunset Beach Volunteer Fire Department for the town to pledge contributions for three years to guarantee a \$25,000 loan to finish buying and equipping a new truck. The county has provided \$45,000 from its contingency fund and the department has raised \$45,000. However, it has nothing that can be used as security for a loan.

"I want to see a financial report before I make that kind of commitment," said Mrs. Thomas.

The proposed budget includes \$181,000 set aside to cover the rest of the sewer system study and other sewer-related expenses, but Barber said he doesn't think all of the money

will be needed this coming fiscal year. Some of it, he postulated, might be available for other purposes, such as expansion of the town hall.

"We have outgrown this facility," he said, echoing the findings of a town facility study completed more than a year ago.

The budget also includes computer software and training funds for the building inspections department, additional financial software, a printer, roof repairs and added storage for town hall, 2.5 percent cost-of-living raises for all employees, \$1,000 for use in beautification and landscaping by a new gardening group, and up to three new telephone lines.

One telephone line would serve the recently beefed-up inspection department, housed at the maintenance shed. Another would serve as an information line during emergencies, said Town Administrator Linda Fluegel, with messages programmed to explain situations that could range from a hurricane to a bridge outage.

The town is also exploring purchase of a third line, for use in contacting police for non-emergency reasons after business hours. Presently such calls are handled by the county's emergency operations center 911 dispatchers, but Ms. Fluegel said that cannot continue. She is checking on alternatives,

such as whether calls can be forwarded to the police department's cellular telephone.

An old police vehicle would be stripped for use by the town administrator.

"I need to be out and about more," said Ms. Fluegel, who has until now used her personal vehicle when on town business.

The general fund proposes these expenditures: governing body, \$5,010; administration, \$98,031; legal, \$6,700; elections, \$500 for an expected sewer referendum; public buildings, \$15,650; police, \$234,905; inspections, \$55,292; streets, \$89,555, including 10 instead of six streetlights; sanitation, \$84,676; drainage and watershed, \$3,000; planning and zoning, \$23,322; health, \$4,569; economic development, \$14,000 in occupancy tax funds to the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce for travel and tourism promotion; Sunset Beach Volunteer Fire Department, \$18,681 or 1 percent of the tax valuation; Calabash Volunteer Emergency Medical Service, \$7,500; cultural and recreation, \$13,760, including contributions to the Symphony Society, Hope Harbor Home, the Brunswick Animal League and the Brunswick County Library; and a transfer to capital improvement of \$39,000.

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