

PERQUIMANS WEEKLY

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County to raise taxes

2-cent increase needed for schools capital projects

SUSAN R. HARRIS

County tax payers will see a slight rise in the property tax bills that will arrive in their homes at summer's end if county commissioners approve the budget proposal submitted by Assistant County Manager Bobby Darden.

The \$10.5 million proposal is less than \$200,000 more than last year's approved budget, and about \$1 million more than the county actually estimates it will spend this fiscal year.

The 2-cents tax rate increase proposed in the budget will help cover some facilities needs in the schools that school board members say can no longer be put off.

Next year's school budget will include replacement of the roof and HVAC system at Perquimans County Middle School. The schools have patched and repaired both over the past few years, but last September's visit by Hurricane Isabel left both the roof and HVAC system in such poor condition, they can no longer be repaired.

"The last few times we experienced rain were unbelievable," said middle school Principal Melvin Hawkins.

The school had to deal with falling ceiling tiles, warped floors and standing water on rainy days.

"Students can't be expected to reach high standards in a crumbling, unsafe school building," said Dr. Kenneth W. Wells. "It is unacceptable to have students attending schools that are unsafe or unhealthy. We are rapidly approaching that point."

School and county officials have discussed completing the middle school project during the coming school year, with renovations to the deteriorating roof and HVAC system at Hertford Grammar School to be funded in the 2006-2007 school year.

The funding for the middle school project is estimated at \$1.8 million. If the budget is approved, funds will come from the land transfer tax reserves which are set aside for school facilities, the tax increase and the Public School Capital Building Fund Reserve.

Another 2-cents tax increase, along with land transfer tax will be needed to complete the \$1.3 million in needs at Hertford Grammar School in 2006-2007, according to the county.

"I trust that voters will support the tax increase which is being considered by the county commissioners, as the fact remains that further delays just mean

further decay of school building conditions," Darden said. "I believe the citizens of Perquimans County want to ensure students and teachers have an environment conducive to academic excellence."

Darden said if the county had received Public School Capital Building Funds over the past two years and next year, the county would have an additional \$200,000.

The school system and county have met with Rural Development to discuss funding avenues to allow the groups to move forward with facilities needs at the high school. Plans at the high school call for a new gymnasium as well as renovations.

Darden stated in his budget message to the county that initial requests from county agencies exceeded expected revenues by over \$400,000, which would have required a 6-cents increase in the property tax rates. Working with department heads in budget workshops, sufficient cuts were made to lower the requests.

The assistant county manager said recent years have been challenging for local governments as the state has withheld local funds to balance its own budget and a slow economy decreased sales tax revenues.

The county's property tax base is expected to continue its steady growth, Darden said, adding that it has grown by an annual average of 4.7 percent over the past decade. The property tax valuation is estimated to be in excess of \$715 million.

Sales taxes are the county's second largest revenue source, Darden said, and are expected to be 6 percent lower in the current year than at their peak three years ago. While some rebounding is expected next fiscal year, Darden said those revenues will not return to previous levels. These lowered funds impact both the county's general operating budget as well as the school system, for which part of the sales tax monies are earmarked.

Helping to bolster county revenues has been the local 1-cent sales tax, which has grown over the past two years, making up some of the shortfall in other sales taxes. In addition, the latest one-half cent sales tax, which is based equally on point-of-sale and state distribution, has grown as well and has now taken the place of reimbursable revenues the county no longer receives.

The proposed budget provides for no salary increases. Darden said the county fully implemented salary increases in January as a result of a salary study. Merit and cost of living raises to keep salaries competitive will be dealt with in subsequent budgets, beginning in 2005-2006.

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FENDER BENDER



Hertford Police investigate an accident on Harvey Point Road Monday afternoon. The final accident report was not available at press time, but Chief Dale Vanscoy said two people were transported by ambulance for medical care, although they did not appear to have life-threatening injuries. The Hertford Fire Department also responded to the accident.

SBA: Prepare for storm season

With the beginning of the six-month Atlantic hurricane season, which runs from June 1 — Nov. 30, the U.S. Small Business Administration urges homeowners and businesses to plan and prepare for the worst-case scenario by taking steps in advance to minimize damage caused by these major storms.

The survival of a community can depend on the ability of businesses and homeowners to minimize the risks that accompany hurricanes.

In the aftermath of September's devastating Hurricane Isabel, the SBA provided more than 8,200 low-interest loans worth \$234 million. Power outages caused by fierce winds and inland flooding contributed to most of the property

losses. Here are some hurricane preparedness tips for homes and businesses:

- Have a disaster plan in place. Find escape routes and establish places to meet. Have on hand emergency phone numbers; business owners should designate a contact person who will communicate with other employees, customers and suppliers. Families should ask an out-of-state relative or friend to serve as the "family contact."

- Insurance. According to the National Flood Insurance Program, only 25 — 50 percent of U.S. homeowners in flood-prone areas have flood insurance. Business owners should review their insurance policies for coverage.

- Disaster survival kit. It should include a flashlight and extra batteries, portable, battery-operated radio and extra batteries, a first-aid kit, non-perishable packaged and canned food, water (a week's worth), a manual can opener, sturdy shoes, a basic tool kit, waterproof plastic bags, and cash.

- Important business records should be stored at an off-site location at least 50 miles away. Computer data should be backed up, saved on diskettes or CD Roms and stored off-site.

To learn more about the SBA's disaster assistance program and links to additional disaster preparedness tips, visit the web site at www.sba.gov/disaster <<http://www.sba.gov/disaster>>.

Town holds line on tax rate

SUSAN R. HARRIS

Property owners in the Town of Hertford will see no increase in their tax bill this fall.

The town passed its fiscal 2004-2005 budget Monday night, which holds the tax rate steady at 48 cents per \$100 valuation.

The town's general fund budget approaches \$2 million.

Ad valorem taxes are expected to generate almost \$377,000 next year, while state shared revenues should bring in just over \$475,000.

The police department will get the lion's share of the budget, at almost \$458,000.

The street department is the next in line with a budget of over \$261,000.

Administration will cost taxpayers \$169,075.

The fire department's budget is \$97,438, while the sanitation department will spend about \$92,000.

Over \$11 million will flow through other town funds for such projects as the water and sewer upgrade, ice plant renovation, Racoon Creek park project, and TEA-21 (lighting) projects

Eagle Pottery opens just south of Hertford

SUSAN R. HARRIS

Sherri McNeill turned an elective class she took while studying at Campbell University into a productive business.

The owner of Eagle Pottery on U.S. Highway 17 South, McNeill took pottery as an elective while earning a religion degree at Campbell. Three years later, she studied pottery again at Montgomery Community College.

She started a business in the basement of the church parsonage she shared with her pastor husband, Kenneth, in Eagle Spring. Soon, she put up a building on a vacant lot next door because Eagle Pottery had grown. In her first year in business, she had people from 27 states and seven countries visit her shop.

When the McNeills moved to Franklinville, she moved her business with her.

Three years ago, the McNeills accepted a call to Hertford Baptist Church. In April 2003, Sherri was ready to feel the smooth, wet clay between her hands again and once more began turning pottery. She offered her dishwasher, microwave and oven safe pieces on consignment at three locations around the county.

This spring, a building



Sherri McNeill is joined by her family, friends and local business and government representatives to celebrate the grand opening of Eagle Pottery on U.S. Highway 17 South.

on Highway 17 became available, and McNeill opted once again to open a retail shop. Occupying the building formerly housing The Orchard Shop and later Heritage House, Eagle Pottery is open Tuesday—Saturday, 9 a.m.—5 p.m.

Not only can people purchase pottery in the shop, but McNeill keeps her wheel set up and visitors may stop by while she's turning her pieces or working on glazing and other areas of production. She welcomes people to stop by and watch, as part of her

goal is to educate people about pottery, the joy of creating pieces and its usefulness in the home.

In just a couple of weeks, McNeill has already had people from 12 states stop by her shop on their travels.

She'd never decorated her wares with animals before, but she's learned that any item featuring turtles is a hot seller here. So, she's fashioned decorative items as well as using turtles on handles of casserole dishes and other pieces.

The McNeills' older chil-

dren, Travis and Kenisha, have tried their hands on the potter's wheel. Travis has turned some pieces for the shop, while Kenisha is adept at glazing and other finishing techniques, while also helping in the shop. On a mission trip since Saturday, McNeill said she misses her "right-hand girl" already.

Jared, 10, and Zeb, 4, can also be found around the shop.

The Chamber of Commerce recently sponsored a ribbon cutting to celebrate the grand opening of Eagle Pottery.

WEEKEND WEATHER

THURSDAY
High: 90
Low: 75
SCATTERED T'STORMS

FRIDAY
High: 93
Low: 75
SCATTERED T'STORMS

SATURDAY
High: 90
Low: 72
ISOLATED T'STORMS