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THE PERQUIMANS WEEKLY

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Herford tax rate steady

SUSAN HARRIS

If the town of Hertford approves the budget recommended by Manager John Christensen, there will be no tax increase for fiscal 2008.

The budget will rise slightly from just under \$1.3 million last year to just over \$1.37 million next year. The tax rate will remain at 49 cents per \$100 valuation, which Christensen estimates will produce \$379,199 in revenue at current collection rates.

The next largest source of revenue for the town is local option sales tax, at \$382,000.

The largest department in the town's general fund is police, with a proposed budget of \$538,070. Salaries and benefits comprise \$408,732 of the total.

The street department budget estimate is almost \$293,000; administration approaches \$200,000 and sanitation is \$118,250. The fire department total is over \$100,000, but grant revenue and the county contribute over \$60,000 of that amount.

Christensen included a 2 percent cost of living raise for employees, but no merit increases. Health insurance for employees will rise 8.3 percent with no change in benefit. Christensen said there are ways to reduce the increase, but it would mean decreasing benefits.

One item in the manager's budget message to the town is that dispatch fees paid to the county will rise about 18 percent over last year's budget, which was not adequate. The cost is expected to be \$50,000.

The town's water and sewer fund budget is \$739,148 and does include a rate increase. Presently, water is \$13.90 for up to 3,000 gallons plus \$5.32 for every thousand gallons over 3,000 gallons. The new rate would be \$15.65 and \$6.00, respectively.

Christensen said the average user consumes 5,000 gallons of water per month, which would cost \$24.54 for water and \$24.54 for sewer for a total of \$49.08. The water rate increase would make it \$27.65 for water and \$27.65 for sewer for a total of \$55.30, or an increase of \$6.22 per month.

The electric fund budget exceeds \$2.8 million, of which over \$2.6 million is the town's wholesale cost of electricity. No electric rate increase is proposed; however, the town will dip almost \$48,000 into its fund balance to balance the electric fund.

The budget also reflects new projections for the water and sewer upgrade project, which now stands at \$168 million with \$10.8 million in loans.

Play ball!



PHOTO BY PHIL HARRIS

Bear Swamp-Beech Springs Ruritans/Albemarle EMC pitcher Sam Phthisic prepares to deliver a pitch as teammate Kolby Walker stands ready on first base during Monday night's Perquimans Youth League games. The Youth League Park, Community Recreation Centre and softball fields in Winfall are in use virtually every day. Admission to games is free and concessions are available.

Deputies investigate Winfall thefts

SUSAN HARRIS

Two county juveniles face charges stemming from a county ATV stolen Friday night.

Sheriff Eric Tilley said juvenile petitions are being sought for two 15-year-olds suspected of stealing the four-wheel all-terrain vehicle from a work shed at the county softball fields in Winfall.

A Winfall resident who lives near the softball fields heard the noise of a motor outside his home around 4:30 or 5 a.m. Saturday. Thinking it unusual, he looked outside and saw two youth riding the four-wheeler. He saw where the pair put the ATV and continued to watch to see where the two went. After he saw them enter a house, he called dispatch to report the incident.

Sheriff's deputies responded to the call and found the four-wheeler where the caller had reported it was parked.

One of the youth confirmed that the two had taken the vehicle, Tilley said.

The sheriff said it may take about two weeks to get the paperwork back to charge the youth.

During the same night, the concession stand at the ballpark was broken into for the second consecutive weekend. Tilley said drink and candy were taken from the stand, which is operated by the senior citizens to help them raise money to participate in Senior Games.

A third incident in the same neighborhood on the same night was also investigated by deputies. A Ford ranger was found wrecked in the 900 block of New Hope Road, near its intersection with Union Hall Road, early Saturday morning. The white truck was owned by Bellwether, the company contracted by the county to read water meters. Tilley said the truck is considered a total loss, with about \$5,000 in damages.

The truck was left at the water department headquarters near the Winfall softball fields on Friday evening when employees left work for the day.

Tilley said no arrests have been made in the concessions stand or truck theft cases, but investigation continues. He said his officers are looking for possible links between the crimes.

Anyone with information on these or any other crimes is asked to contact the sheriff's department at 426-5615.

County holds line on 2008 tax rate

SUSAN HARRIS

Growth in the tax base allowed County Manager Bobby Darden to submit a proposed budget with no tax rate increase for fiscal 2007-2008.

Presenting his \$12.8 million budget to county commissioners Monday night, Darden said the growth in the tax base is expected to increase ad valorem tax revenues by about \$380,000 next year. Without the increased property valuation, the tax rate would have had to rise by four cents to produce the same revenue. If commissioners approve the budget, the tax rate will remain at 67 cents per \$100 valuation. Last year's county budget was just under \$12.5 million.

Ad valorem tax, or taxes assessed on real estate, personal property and vehicles, is expected to bring in almost \$6.4 million in revenues next year. Sales tax should generate almost \$2.3 million, with fees and other revenues bringing in just over \$2 million.

The school system is the recipient of a large chunk of the county budget. Schools will receive over \$1.8 million in current expense appropriation; \$363,380 for capital expense; and \$344,000 for

construction reserve. In addition, \$751,848 will pay loans for school capital improvement projects. All totaled, the schools will get about \$3.3 million. Darden said the amount is 20 percent higher than last year's allocation.

"The level of support that the Board of Commissioners has been able to provide to the school system for capital projects recently has been amazing for one of the smallest counties in the state," Darden said. "For the past three fiscal years, Perquimans County has ranked second in the state in capital spending per student."

Darden said the county has provided almost \$4 million out-of-pocket for projects at the high and middle schools. An \$11 million loan has been obtained for the high school gym construction and other renovations at that site.

Significantly impacting this year's budget is costs associated with the new Albemarle District Jail, which is under construction at present and is expected to be operational in spring of 2008. The facility will replace the under-sized facility in use now by Pasquotank, Camden and Perquimans counties.

Perquimans' portion of the operations and new debt service will require an additional \$312,000 in funding, which is a 90 percent increase from last year, Darden said.

Plans call for the facility to house federal inmates and inmates from other counties in order to help offset debt service, but the facility must be fully operational before that can happen.

For next year, the jail will get \$431,823 for operations and \$223,650 for debt service.

Social services will spend over \$2.8 million next year, a little over half of which will come from state and federal funds. Medicaid eats up a huge portion of the DSS budget, at about \$800,000. Darden said North Carolina is the only state that passes the non-federally funded share of Medicaid down to the county level.

Darden said the only new full-time employee in the budget is a deputy, and there is a part-time position going to full-time for the Senior Center due to increased participation. Also, three positions will be reclassified to include additional responsibilities and the resulting pay grade and step increases. Those

positions are clerk to the board, who will assume duties of personnel officer; tax administrator, who will assume special projects coordinator; and code enforcement officer, who will assume safety officer.

Emergency Medical Services will see a 9 percent boost in its budget, mainly due to the purchase of a new ambulance, expected to cost \$92,000. In addition, the service has raised its certification level, resulting in a rise in salaries. To help offset its costs, a committee was formed to review billing procedures and options to help improve collections for services. Commissioners approved a \$300 fee for on-site care Monday night.

All county employees will receive a 2.5 percent cost-of-living increase effective July 1. Also included is normal step increases and merit increases per the personnel policy. The county's contribution to the North Carolina Retirement Plan will rise from 1.5 percent to 2.5 percent on Jan. 1, 2008.

By the end of the fiscal year, both the 1988 and 1998 school construction loans will be paid in full, as well as two water loans. The county paid off loans for

the Inter-County Water System, commerce centre and recreation center this fiscal year. The county anticipates having only a \$3 million water loan for the New Hope water line and the \$11 million high school project loan after the fiscal 2008.

The solid waste fee will go from \$100 to \$108 per year in response to rising costs.

A copy of the budget is available for review during regular business hours at the office of the clerk to the board of commissioners upstairs in the courthouse. A public hearing is scheduled for June 25 at 7 p.m. in the commissioner's room in the courthouse annex.

WEEKEND WEATHER

THURSDAY
HIGH: 87, LOW: 69
CLOUDY
FRIDAY
HIGH: 94, LOW: 75
PARTLY CLOUDY
SATURDAY
HIGH: 90, LOW: 69
ISOLATED T'STORMS