

2021/2022 Budget Cycle Issues

After receiving and viewing the proposed budget, here are a few topline details for you to know:

1. The Proposed Budget is slated to rise from \$62 million to \$77 million. Much of that can be attributed to FEMA projects and a large rise in grant accounts.
2. For the first time in many years, we see several new positions added. Last year the County received a lot of extra money from Covid-19 funds and spending went through the roof. Without that money this year, new tax money is needed to keep up the enhanced spending level.
3. We have never seen Capital Spending at this pace. Roughly 20 pieces of equipment and vehicles are being requested; well above past budgets.
4. The Sheriff is asking for a 5% increase that reflects an 8% increase in personnel costs. We have spoken to the Sheriff. We have a lot of respect for the Sheriff, but we always must keep in mind that he advocates for his people as he should. Commissioners need to scrutinize all Constitutionals and not take their word as final fact. It is a Constitutional Responsibility of Commissioners to approve Constitutional Officers' budgets. I regret to inform you, that they largely avoid the responsibility to do a deep dive into their budgets.
5. The Property Appraiser's budget request is puzzling. There is no increase in budget but a \$120,000 increase in Regular Class RET employees. Why? Why are computer hosting costs so high at \$8,000 a year? The Franklin County Property Appraiser cost is the highest per capita costs in our area by far. Why? One reason may be the antiquated process of sending out two people to measure a building instead of using laser measuring devices that cost little.
6. The large increase in Travel, Postage, Freight, Repairs, and Maintenance in many budgets across the spectrum.
7. I know that the staff that puts these budgets together are fantastic. However, I question whether anyone does what we do and look at budget requests afterward, and does a sanity check. There are obvious areas of concern and it's not beyond one or more individuals to pad their budgets. We believe some submitted budgets could use a thorough scrubbing to eliminate waste, unequal pay requests, and in one or two cases, too large a headcount.
8. To our knowledge, no one looks at actual spending in the current year to compare against new budget requests and asks for justification. New budgets typically just build on old budgets.
9. Parks and Recreation are requesting a 6.75% increase. 14% increase in Regular Class Employees. Almost a tripling of costs for Youth Support Activities. We worry that supporting youth activities and spending on trips, dinners, and travel without requiring the kids and their parents to do any fundraising sends the wrong message that everything should be free. 40% increase in Operating Supplies, 25% increase in Operating Expenses. Not exactly belt-tightening! Further scrutiny is demanded.
10. Building Department Operating supplies increased by 80%.
11. Auditors request a 3.5% increase this year. We believe that a Request for Proposal should go out anytime someone increases their annual fee. In regards to this Auditor, there have been too many issues over the years that in our opinion that were missed. One or two became criminal issues later. We'd like to see a new Auditor look at the County with fresh eyes.
12. This will be a touchy subject. Employee Health Insurance. Study whether our policy and copays by employees are above or below other counties. We suspect that there might not be enough

cost-sharing by employees. The county is proposing \$1.6 million for health insurance this year. It needs to be looked at.

13. Weems is losing money (after subsidies) at an increasing rate. And, that was before major pay increases have been approved. Where is the money coming from? What happens if Weems must pay some of the roughly \$3 million it has received so far? Contingencies, or constant emergencies? Weems is constantly changing its Financial Statement and methodology. There is no way to spot trends anymore.
14. Weems ambulance service is highly subsidized with one of the lowest user reimbursement rates in the County. Money must be collected. It's not free.
15. Divert non-emergency transport to lower-cost means. Average ambulance ride costs are always 4 figures or above we believe. Frequent flyers are using the ambulance service to get to Tallahassee; using it as a taxicab.
16. At least \$100,000 should be allocated by TDC to Parks and Recreation to support tourist activity.
17. No one, and I mean no one knows how much cash the county retains in various funds, year after year, that potentially could be reduced or eliminated. Have an outside consultant look at our funds, retention requirements, and a fiscally responsible policy towards keeping money forever in funds not mandated by law or need.
18. Create a method to track spending by departments and constitutionals in the last three budget months to ensure money is not being dumped into unwise purchases simply to ensure all money is spent. Happens all the time. Provide Commissioners with YTD spending by each constitutional/department to prompt questions at budget time.
19. Bid out our fuel needs rather than always going with Gander. The CCFC once went out to get bids that were \$0.10 lower on average than the county was paying. Annual savings were more than \$100k between the county and school board.
20. Reduce the cost of garbage collection for Franklin County citizens and reduce the cost to pick up trash by county personnel by requiring county-wide garbage pickup paid by the county and put on our tax bill.
21. Require a 0.5% across-the-board budget cut. There is no way that making this simple and easy to understand change should impact services within the county. It is a way of signaling to county staff, Departments, and Constitutionals that the BOCC is serious about reining in costs.
22. Increase efficiency of employees who spend an average of more than 10% of their day on sites like eBay, Amazon, FB, and others. This was determined by a request for internet traffic records provided by Michael Moron some years back. Thousands of hours each month are wasted in this manner.

General Comments:

The county exists to fill the needs of the citizens and not the other way around. At this time, county employees are better compensated than the vast majority of citizens within the county. There is zero stamped for existing employees leaving the county for better positions. With the new pay plan, a great leap forward is being enacted that will require more and more money going forward. For budgetary purposes, Commissioners have lost control of future budget discipline, and the full \$1.2 million required to increase budgets is already spent, just not all this year. Also, Erin said that benefits like retirement were not factored into that decision. What will that cost be this year and in out years? This is a very big deal. That decision, already made will complicate county finances for years to come. In good years, like now, we can take the hit. But, in bad years, which inevitably will come, employee headcounts will have to come down, just as they did in the last downturn. Employees are not altruistic, they will not take reductions, employees will be let go.

Already, employees in several Constitutional Offices are overpaid. This is particularly true in the P.A.'s office with the highest average salaries of any other Constitutional, except perhaps the Sheriff's office. A significant number of Sheriffs employees are either non-sworn or jail personnel that doesn't face the same risk as road deputies and need not be paid differently than other employees.

Our (the CCFC's) issue is that there is no one charged with finding savings, and therefore none are found. The long-term effect of not controlling both the millage rate and taxing is going to affect the growth of the tax digest as it did after the last round of investors fled after the last missteps in 2008. We don't learn our lessons.

The cost to go to the roll-back rate is minuscule in comparison to the total budget is minuscule and has a look of "Let them eat cake." This will be the fifth tax increase. Save our Homes slows the tax increase on Homesteaded individuals but does nothing to protect those building new homes, businesses, or land sales. All of these people and businesses will continue to see ever-higher taxes for the same services, which are few and far between. Factually, many of the services people receive are fee-based anyway (building department, landfill, court, etc.) and not a subsidized service of the county.

Recognize that the county as a whole will do better with a fiscally sound policy of zero-based budgeting executed on a professional basis. Our county has not grown much in the last 20 years. Why? It is our opinion that it is due to mismanagement by the County Commission. You don't know what you don't know. Only by speaking to and listening to smarter, more experienced individuals will the county discover what works and what doesn't. It is time for Franklin County to stop being a Constrained County and become a regional star through better management tactics, vision, and a strict policy of requiring "Best Practice" management.

Allan Feifer

President,

Concerned Citizens of Franklin County, Inc.