

County budget on sound footing; challenges ahead

By Hector Flores

With development booming throughout the county, our budget is on sound footing, Budget Director Gordon Burger told county commissioners during a workshop Tuesday. Revenues and expenses are in alignment in the near term, but unprecedented global economic conditions ranging from construction costs to interest rate increases may create some challenges and will drive decision-making on project timelines.

More than 4,000 residential building permits were issued in 2021 and there are no signs of a slowdown this year. As those homes are completed and added to the tax rolls in the coming years, general fund revenue is projected to rise nearly 60% in the next 10 years. With those added residents, expenditures related to providing services will rise in a similar fashion, posing budgetary pressures from inflation, construction costs and the potential for an economic downturn, Burger said.

Commission decisions, such as setting aside revenue generated by growth, will cover costs for beach renourishment, Charlotte Sports Park operations and non-profit subsidies for emergency services. Staffing levels have remained flat in the past decade, rising by only a half-percentage point per 1,000 residents since Fiscal Year 2011-12. In recent years, staffing levels have been impacted by a labor shortage, which is likely to persist in the short-term. The county is aggressively recruiting employees at numerous job fairs and has adjusted facility hours and operations accordingly, while continuing to deliver exceptional service.

More than 20% of the county workforce is in the Fire & EMS Department, 17% in the Utilities Department and another 13% in the Public Works Department. That's fully half of county staff working in emergency services and operating and maintaining water, sewer, transportation and stormwater infrastructure, along with providing solid waste and mosquito and aquatic weed control functions. Somewhere in the county, at any time of day or night, county staff are serving the public, saving lives, keeping the taps flowing and the traffic moving.

As regular readers of this column know, the county has committed itself to delivering projects funded by the voter-approved 1% local option sales tax in a timely and cost-effective manner. The board discussed what that may look like in the near-term due to construction cost escalation. Burger said consideration should be given to pausing some new construction until costs come down to squeeze the most impact out of sales tax dollars as possible. Delaying new projects would also allow the county to take advantage of future lower costs in the event of an economic downturn and create jobs.

It's both a challenging and exciting time to be in public service today. In my more than 25 years of working for Charlotte County, I have never been more proud of my colleagues for rising to meet whatever obstacles confront them. Having a clear vision of long-term budgetary scenarios and a commitment to efficient and effective delivery of public services puts us in a strong position to take advantage of opportunities and overcome hurdles ahead of us.

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