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Residents would pay 7.9% more in taxes under Comal plan

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NEW BRAUNFELS -- Comal County Judge Danny Scheel's proposed 2007 budget would increase spending almost 16 percent and collect 7.9 percent more in taxes from residents. The increases come a year after a 12.5 percent county tax increase prompted a tax rollback effort that narrowly failed in a May referendum.

The proposed tax rate of 31.5201 cents per \$100 of appraised value is almost 4 cents lower than this year's tax rate. However, rising property values mean the county would raise 7.9 percent more tax revenue than this year.

If the tax rate is adopted as proposed, the owner of a home with a taxable value of \$100,000 would pay \$315 in county taxes next year.

"At first glance, I'd say the judge did a good job on the proposed budget," said County Commissioner Jan Kennedy. "Overall, it looks like a good, sound budget with things included that we need to be doing."

County spending would jump from \$37.8 million to \$43.8 million. Half the \$6 million increase would go to purchase right of way and relocate utilities for the county's share of state projects to widen Texas 46 and U.S. 281.

Nearly \$1 million would go for employee pay raises of up to 4 percent and to implement the recommendations included in a county salary survey. The raises would average about \$1,600 per employee.

Scheel also proposed adding \$550,000 to the county's reserve fund, part of a multi-year effort to rebuild it after unbudgeted expenses connected to major floods in 1998 and 2002 depleted the fund.

A proposal to add 10 employees in various departments would add another \$400,000 to the budget. Budget increases for the Sheriff's Department and computer services would add \$340,000.

Also, creation of a planned new district court will cost \$350,000.

Elected officials would get no raises this year if commissioners adopt the budget as proposed, which would mean their raises over a three-year period would total 5 percent.

"I'm studying the issue, especially for the constables," said Commissioner **Greg Parker**. "Elected officials are full-time employees, not part-time and they should be paid as such."

Commissioner Jack Dawson said he hopes the public understands why the tax increase is needed in the wake of last year's increase, and noted Comal County has one of the lowest tax rates of any county its size in the state.

"The reason we got in the rollback problem in the first place was the good-old-boy attitude of 'no tax increases' caught up to us and now we are paying the price," he said.

Douglas Kirk, a newspaper publisher who led the tax rollback effort this spring, said the proposed increase in spending and taxes shows the county leaders "are completely out of touch with the public."

"They do not have any regard for the taxpayers," he said. "They can lower the rate we pay, but if they raise more money, it's a tax increase. I'd like to see them reducing the size of government and decreasing the size of the checks we write."

Public hearings on the tax rate will be held at 5:30 p.m. Aug. 24 and 28. Commissioners will vote on the budget and tax rate immediately after the second meeting.

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