

# Commissioners approve 2-cent tax rate hike

By Ron Maloney | Posted: Friday, September 16, 2005 12:00 am

Comal County commissioners Thursday voted to increase the tax rate by 2 cents per \$100 for 2006.

The increase to 35.3747 cents, which came after two public hearings that no member of the public attended, will mean taxes on a home with a \$100,000 taxable value will increase by \$19.27 per \$100 of assessed valuation.

The tax rate will fund a general fund budget of \$26.1 million and debt service of \$1.4 million adopted in August on a 3-1 vote by commissioners.

Freshman Precinct 3 Commissioner Greg Parker did not support the budget because he didn't believe it went far enough in raises for sheriff's deputies, deputy constables and other employees.

What was new this year was Precinct 2 Commissioner Jay Millikin, who has never supported a county budget, voted in favor of the 2006 budget.

"We've worked for the better part of six years to eliminate funding for budgets that existed even before 1999 which had expenses for activities I thought were inappropriate for county taxpayers to support, those being other taxing entities and nonprofit organizations," Millikin said.

This year was only the second in the administration of County Judge Danny Scheel where the county sought a tax rate increase — the other being a 1-cent hike in 2003 to pay for restoration costs in the aftermath of the 2002 flood.

Scheel attempted to hold the rate increase as low as possible in his proposed budget, asking the county's department heads to shave an additional 10 percent in costs near the end of the budget process in mid-July.

Scheel noted he had taken hits for this year's budget, tax increase and the way it is reported by the county in legal ads.

He noted the state dictates the terminology.

"It's less than \$20 a year on a \$100,000 home," he said.

Millikin noted the county expected 2006 to be a tough budget year more than a year ago.

"The floods in 1998 and 2002 extracted money from our reserves, and then we had the vote in November freezing taxes for the disabled and those 65 and over," Millikin said.

Add to that a 20 percent increase in costs for indigent health care and gasoline costs more than 30 percent higher, and the county faced a real crunch, Millikin said.

"Our outside auditor has told us for two years we need to increase our reserves," Millikin said. "In addition to that, there was a consensus on the court to provide a cost-of-living allowance and/or salary increase for elected officials and employees."

How the county fares next year — and how tight budgets will be — will depend largely on what happens in the Legislature, Millikin said.

“That will be heavily dependent upon what the Legislature does to us in regard to appraisal caps and tax rate rollbacks,” Millikin said. “Both have substantial negative impact for any government, county or city.”