

Palm Beach County commissioners still uncertain on proposed 14.9 percent tax-rate hike

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WEST PALM BEACH — Palm Beach County commissioners continued to nibble away at ways to cut the county's cash-strapped budget today, but stopped short of saying whether they will endorse a 14.9 percent increase in the countywide property tax rate.

In their second meeting this month on the county's \$4 billion spending plan, commissioners continued to press for furloughs, buyouts for employees and salary cuts. They also asked County Administrator Bob Weisman to look for "lump sum cuts" that would not result in layoffs.



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Under the state's truth-in-millage law, it would not be considered a tax increase, and owners of some properties would get a tax cut. However, many of those who own homesteaded property would see their county tax bills rise.

Commissioners said they would also like to consider countywide pay cuts for all employees, including sheriff's deputies and elections workers. The commission plans to send a request to the county's unions

The commission did not say whether it would support Weisman's proposal to raise the tax rate to just over \$4.34 for each \$1,000 of taxable value, up from this year's rate of just over \$3.78.

At that rate, the county would generate roughly the same amount of tax revenue as it is getting this year.

asking them to support the cut.

Even if the unions agree, the cuts would not be in place until next year, Weisman said.

County leaders estimate the county will face a \$110 million budget shortfall in 2011.

Weisman has proposed setting aside roughly \$8.2 million from this year's spending plan to help ease the 2011 deficit. But that money could also be used to lower the proposed tax rate slightly, he said.

At the \$4.34 rate, the owner of a \$250,000 home with a \$50,000 homestead exemption would pay about \$870 in county taxes next year, up \$114 from this year's bill. That calculation assumes that the home's appraised value rises by 0.1 percent, the increase many homesteaded properties face this year.

That figure does not include what property owners pay to the school board, city governments and other taxing authorities.

Commissioner Shelley Vana said the county needs to start focusing on the "core" services it wants to provide.

"We really should take some time to decide what our main focus should be ... what do we believe our constituents want us to provide," Vana said. "We can't afford to leave any stone unturned in how to be more efficient."

Meanwhile, Commissioner Karen Marcus said she wants the county to consider keeping several building department employees that administrators plan to lay off. The inspectors, she said, would be sorely needed if a hurricane were to hit the county.

Marcus asked that the money be taken from the county's general fund and returned once building permit revenue increases.

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