

Media Advisory – Sept. 4, 2008

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Reardon proposes 2009-2010 budget without tax increase

Without recommending a property tax increase to cover a shortfall in projected revenues, Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon proposed Thursday the county's first biennial budget for 2009-2010.

Instead, Reardon has proposed trimming back expenses to meet current revenue trends. Under his proposal, the total General Fund budget for 2009 is \$215 million – a 2.5 percent reduction from the county's previously adopted five-year financial plan.

Despite continued growth in new jobs in Snohomish County, Reardon said it has become clear that the county's nearly 700,000 residents have become more conservative in their spending habits and had less disposable income to spend.

“County residents are concerned about the uncertainty of a changing international economy, a presidential election that will affect their futures and the impact of the growing price of oil and food on their pocketbooks,” he said.

The result is that 2008 County General Fund revenues are projected to fall \$9.3 million below previously budgeted levels.

“By focusing on a sustainable level of expenditures we will continue to meet the core demands of our residents now and allow for modest, responsible increases to meet our residents' needs in the out years,” Reardon said.

To balance the shortfall, Reardon's proposed budget reduces FTEs just over 4.5 percent with reductions in 15 of 22 General Fund Departments across all branches of government. Approximately 45 percent of those General Fund FTE reductions come from departments that report to the Executive's office despite representing less than 35 percent of the countywide General Fund FTEs.

Not all positions to be cut are currently filled. The county's Human Resources Department has been instructed to begin finding alternative employment within county government and out for affected employees.

Public safety, however, remains the county's top General Fund priority, Reardon said. As proposed by Sheriff John Lovick, the budget includes a new Snohomish County Auto Theft Task Force. This multi-jurisdictional task force will combine the efforts of six Snohomish County agencies including the Prosecutor's Office and the Washington State Patrol in the fight against auto theft. Snohomish County is one of the hardest hit areas of Washington State with nearly 6,000 vehicles stolen every year.

Beginning with the 2009 school year, Reardon also has recommended the county invest in the Early Childhood Educational Assistance Program, or ECEAP. Additional funding from the county will allow more families to utilize the program that gives children a better start in life and parents the tools they need to raise healthier children.

“In my first budget I made this same proposal,” Reardon said. “Had that council in 2004 supported this proposal, today more than 100 children would have received early learning education.”

Senior Centers also will see a 50-percent increase in funding by 2010 under Reardon’s plan, providing for additional services that allow Snohomish County’s seniors to live increasingly healthier, happier and more meaningful lives.

Finally, highlighted Thursday was the inclusion of a new round of money for the county’s Youth Amenities and Recreation Development, or YARD, grant program. In 2008, 10 grants were awarded, turning about \$450,000 in county funds into nearly \$1 million in parks improvements through private-public partnerships.

This is the fifth year Reardon has proposed a budget without a call to increase property taxes.

Budgeting began more than three months ago when more than 100 county employees – including staff from departments run by other elected officials – met to prioritize expenditures based on departmental requests.

Executive staff then met with individual department heads and elected officials to discuss their needs for expenditures and staffing.

“This has been a transparent process from the beginning that has involved all the pertinent parties,” Reardon said. “Knowing the difficulties that next year’s budget would bring, we also have worked hard to provide this budget proposal more than a month earlier than expected.”

The County Council, which will now begin its budget deliberations, traditionally has received the budget by the beginning of October each year.

To view Thursday’s budget address and budget summary, go to www.snoco.org and type “budget” in the search box.

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