

It's Easy Thanks To \$8.5B Jump In Ratables

By JOE ZELNIK

CREST HAVEN — "It was so easy, even a caveman could do it," cracked Freeholder Gerald M. Thornton at public budget deliberations Jan. 18.

The reference was to a series of Gelco ads that feature a caveman and have drawn considerable attention including some pretty funny Spout Offs.

The "it" was freeholder participation in this year's budget process which resulted in approval of a record \$133-million budget that was due to be introduced at yesterday's freeholder meeting.

Although up 3.73 percent, or \$4.8 million, and although the amount to be raised by county taxes is up 0.6 percent, or \$4.9 million, the budget reduces the county tax rate by 1.8 cents to a record low 15.15 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

People who live in caves and houses alike should find that good news, a result largely of increased ratables, which went to \$52.8 billion, from \$44.3 billion, a whopping 19.27 percent jump. Last year it was 24.8 percent.

"I'd love to see that next year," commented Treasurer Ed Grant, "but the market, while still healthy, has cooled off."

The actual tax rate varies by town according to assessment ratios. If your town is underassessed, your rate will be higher; if overassessed, your rate will be lower.

At 15.15 cents, a property assessed at \$100,000 would pay county taxes of \$151.50. Multiply according for higher assessments. Million-dollar property: \$1,151.50.

The county tax will bring in \$80 million compared to \$75 million last year. The tax rate cut could have been more, but freeholders chose to use only \$15.4 million of their \$29.8 million surplus, 51 percent, compared to \$19.9 million of some \$35.8 million last year, 56 percent.

County Administrator Steve O'Connor told this newspaper the county has to be prepared to amend its budget and use surplus to pay for the potential outcome of a court-mandated manpower study.

"We gave the prosecutor the OE (other ex-
(Page A12 Please)

County Budget

(From Page A1)

penses) he needed right now," O'Connor added.

He said a \$200,000 grants program for the arts will continue, but last year's popular \$3.8-million Municipal Public Improvements Joint Venture Program will be replaced by a program of using county bond money for municipal improvements, "preliminarily" over three years.

This will not impact the budget, he said, because it will be bond money.

Local revenues are up almost \$3 million, or 12 percent, to \$27.2 million from \$24.2 million.

Despite a "modest reduction" of \$217,000 in "budgeted" county clerk fees according to O'Connor, there are anticipated increases of \$2.2 million from the Crest Haven Nursing Home, \$1.8 million in interest on investments, and \$450,000 in the new home health care program.

The clerk's "anticipated" property transfer fees actually dropped \$3.4 million in 2006, to \$6.4 million from \$9.8 million, but that decline went into a lower surplus, according to O'Connor.

Money from the state and federal governments is anticipated to climb 17.5 percent, to \$10.7 million from \$9.1 million.

The county was helped this year by an 8.3 percent reduction in debt service, to \$7.1 million from \$7.9 million.

Where's the additional \$4.5 million in revenue going to be spent?

Salary and wages will increase \$2.74 million or 6.7 percent to \$43.8 million. Only \$178,155 of that goes to seven new positions: animal shelter manager, sheriff's officer, corrections officer, graduate nurse full time, graduate nurse part time, assistant director of nursing, and occupational therapist part time. Most of the jobs start in several months so the increase does not reflect a full year.

The balance represents contracted and awarded salary increases.

Other expenses (OE) will climb \$3.5 million or 5.56 percent to \$66.4 million.

Health insurance and pensions will cost \$1 million more. Cost for inmate medical care and state mental health and welfare will climb \$862,000. Expansion of the Technical High school, \$675,000. Fuel and utilities almost \$300,000. Prosecutor "immediate needs" including a county-wide SWAT team, \$255,000. And the transition of in-house cleaning services to a private vendor, \$200,000.

O'Connor said that will be compensated for in the first year by attrition. No one was

laid off. Five persons were reassigned to posts where retirements took place.

Capital items, which are supposed to last at least five years, inched up again this year to \$4.8 million. That's a boost of \$305,672 or 6.83 percent.

Those capital item requests, a sort-of department head wish list, started at a record \$18 million, according to Kim Allen, who took over as head of Purchasing from Eugene Sicilia at the end of the year, when much of the budget preparations were already concluded.

Much of the reductions will reappear in bond ordinances, she said.

The list of postponed or rejected items on a "B" and "C" list totaled only \$550,844.

The approved (or "A") list included \$349,392 for computers, \$897,411 for vehicles and heavy equipment, \$771,350 for improvements to building and grounds, and \$1,261,278 for "other."

Examples:

No one at the Prosecutor's Office will have to walk to a crime scene. It will receive 11 new vehicles, at \$23,712 each, and four replacement vehicles.

Dogs in the Sheriff's K-9 Corps won't have to ride in a Dodge van with 78,000 miles on it anymore. They'll be in a new

\$35,384 Dodge Durango. That includes additional equipment of some \$15,000.

A second Dodge Durango will replace a Chevy Tahoe with 95,259 miles. It will cost \$30,690 which includes about \$11,000 in additional equipment.

Among other items: Traffic signals and components, \$188,889; furniture, \$110,000; \$45,000 for a large document copier, \$68,000 for equipment to replace bridge lighting fixtures (year one of a three-year project), \$65,000 for a lift-equipped minibus for the Crest Haven Nursing Home, \$38,000 to refurbish the basketball courts and \$16,500 for paracourse exercising stations and area curbing at the county park.

All freeholders, in the 25-minute session, joined in praising the work of the Budget Review Team consisting of Sicilia and Allen, MIS Director Shep Taylor, Personnel Director Barbara Bakley-Marrino, Treasurer Grant and Administrator O'Connor.

Public hearing on the budget is at 4:30 p.m. Feb. 27, normally followed by adoption. But the public can comment during the public participation of any meeting before then.

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