

Tax rate for Forsyth will remain at 67.4 cents

Schools will get \$112.3M, down from \$113.5M in '09

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Forsyth County commissioners say they want tough accountability standards for the public schools in exchange for a spending increase that still leaves the school system getting less money than last year.

Commissioners unanimously approved the county's 2010-11 budget yesterday afternoon, leaving the tax rate at 67.4 cents for every \$100 of taxable property. That means the owner of a \$150,000 house will pay \$1,011 in county taxes.

Commissioners resolved the key debate on school spending by approving \$109.9 million in current-expense spending for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, plus \$2.5 million in capital-outlay money. That puts the county's total school appropriation at \$112.3 million, down from the \$113.5 given last year for the fiscal year that ends June 30.

School officials had asked for \$114.1 million, and County Manager Dudley Watts had recommended \$107.2 million. The total county budget comes to \$395.3 million.

Aside from the increase for schools, the commissioners more or less approved intact the bare-bones budget proposed by Watts. They did make some changes: As expected from earlier discussions, they added two health positions and a sheriff's deputy for Lewisville, and they added money to continue a domestic-violence program.

he help for that program, called "Safe on Seven," included money for an office position and copier costs.

The Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County also received \$19,000 that had been cut from the original budget proposal.

School officials and their supporters seemed somewhat mollified by the board's decision to restore about \$800,000 to a capital-outlay budget line that had been cut.

But they said that the school system will still struggle with lower spending, and will have to cut about \$1.8 million from its budget.

"Obviously it's good to get back to that plateau rather than down the hill further,"

Superintendent Don Martin said. It's also good news, he said, that state legislators may not be cutting money for education as much as officials feared. "It is a little brighter than it was," Martin said.

Commissioners expect school officials to report during the coming year on test scores, and on graduation rates and ways to improve them. They also want improvement in school discipline. They also want the school system to work with the county and come up with a formula for annual funding.

Restoring the capital-outlay money didn't budge the current-expense amount the county gave to the schools. And the current-expense allocation is going to be changed when the county sets up a new capital fund for the schools next month-- one that will be controlled by the county, not the schools.

When commissioners began yesterday's budget session, they had two options to consider. One would have kept the total county funding at \$111.5 million by using \$800,000 from a school capital-outlay account as part of the \$2.7 million the board was adding to the schools' current-expense account.

The other, which the board chose, put \$800,000 from the county's reserves into the \$2.7 million increase, and left the capital-outlay account untouched. County administrators said that it didn't make a large difference whether the money was left in or out of the capital-outlay account, since much of it will be transferred to the new capital fund.

But Commissioner Gloria Whisenhunt, who had suggested restoring the cut, said that school officials won't be able to use the \$800,000 cut against the county board. She said that they will have to acknowledge getting a 2.4 percent increase over what the county manager recommended, rather than a 1.7 percent increase.

Commissioners ended the meeting with a defense of plans to improve the pool at Tanglewood Park, a \$1.7 million project that had come under attack from many school supporters. "The pool is an asset," Commissioner Walter Marshall said.

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