

Supervisors support plan to lower tax rate further

Board makes \$3.5 million in tentative cuts to proposed budget

By Coy Ferrell
FAUQUIER TIMES STAFF WRITER

Supervisors have signaled their intention to cut \$3.5 million from the proposed FY 2023 county budget, reducing the average real estate tax bill by \$109 per year compared to the original draft budget. The average homeowner would still pay \$430 more this year if the cuts were implemented, however, because real estate values have risen significantly since the last reassessment in 2017.

At a March 29 work session, supervisors voiced support for a plan that would eliminate seven new positions proposed in the original budget draft and hold off on implementing pay scales for employees of the sheriff's office and the fire and rescue department. Providing health insurance to county employees will cost less this year than initially anticipated; that will also help further the supervisors' goal.

The original budget proposed by County Administrator Paul McCulla last month would have set this year's real estate tax rate at 93.3 cents per \$100 of assessed value, the lowest rate in 13 years. With these new cuts supported by supervisors, the rate would be further reduced to about 91 cents.

"We've just got to make sure that we're doing the absolute best with this budget so we're not reaching in folks' pockets any more than we need to be," said Supervisor Chris Butler (Lee District).

Supervisors are scheduled to convene April 11 to make formal changes to McCulla's proposed budget. A final vote on the budget is now tentatively scheduled for April 12.

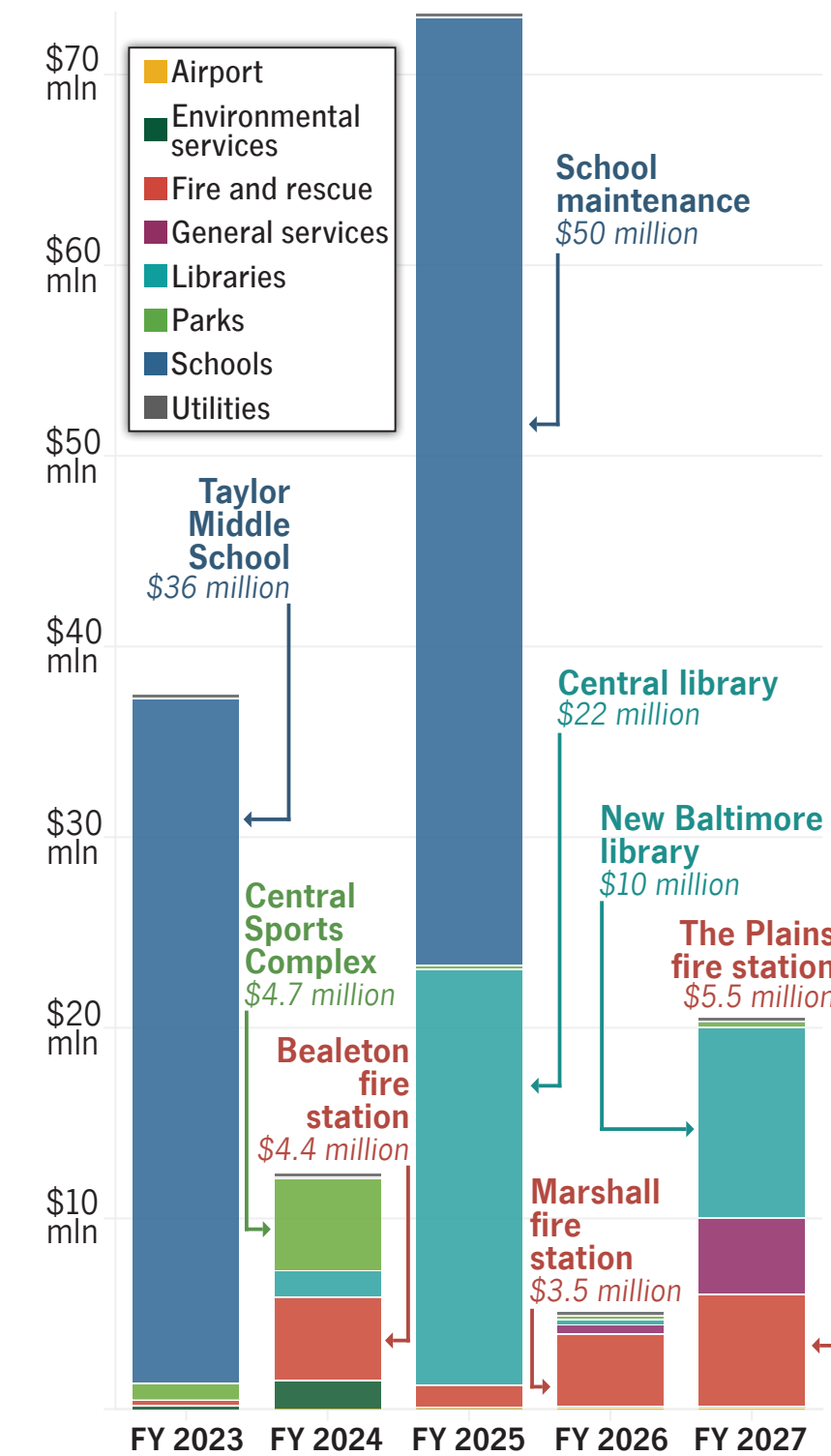
Cuts to operating costs

McCulla's original budget proposal had anticipated that the cost of providing health insurance to county employees outside the school division would rise 15% this year. But bids came in far below budget, freeing up \$860,000 of the \$3.5 million supervisors look poised to eliminate from the proposed budget. (The school division's health care costs will be \$1.5 million less than expected.)

Under the plan outlined March 29, seven new positions would be eliminated from the proposed budget, totaling \$582,000 in savings. Those positions include:

- A senior planner in the community development department;
- An assistant county attorney;
- A contract administrator in the finance department;
- An inventory control employee in the general services department;
- An information security analyst in the IT department;
- A patrol deputy in the sheriff's office dedicated to traffic enforcement;
- A facilities maintenance worker in the parks and recreation department.

Revised 5-year capital spending plan



Data source: Fauquier County Office of Management and Budget, March 29 presentation

Additional savings of \$751,000 would be realized by postponing the introduction of stepped pay scales — like those already used in the school division — for county-employed first responders. Instead, all county employees, including first responders, would receive a flat 5% pay raise. Had the pay scales been implemented, other county employees would have received 3% raises.

While implementing stepped pay scales would have cost the county more money overall, doing so was set to give some longtime employees raises of much more than 5% while leaving newer employees with little to no pay increases.

"I think that 5% kind of puts the sheriff's office kind of in line with what the step was going to look like anyway," Interim Sheriff Jeremy Falls told supervisors, noting that a blanket raise would benefit all employees.

Fire Chief Darren Stevens said that going with 5% raises "is a fantastic path," though he noted that stepped pay scales could help retain

more experienced fire and rescue personnel by rewarding them with bigger raises.

Commissioner of the Revenue Eric Maybach also chimed in, arguing that giving all county employees the same raise sent the right message. "A lot of the employees feel they get left behind," he said. "I think it needs to be known that [those who are not first responders] are cared about just as much."

Supervisors left in place a plan to raise the minimum wage for county employees to \$15 per hour and address salary compression.

The plan would also cut \$527,000 from the initially proposed fire and rescue department's overtime budget and \$233,000 from that department's workers' compensation budget.

Additionally, the plan would cover \$300,000 of capital improvement costs for fire and rescue projects — money originally included in the FY 2023 budget proposal — with funds from the county's capital reserve fund instead.

Revised capital improvement program

Supervisors also signaled support March 29 for changes to the five-year capital spending plan. Most significantly, the revisions would eliminate a \$55 million courthouse project from the five-year plan and replace it with a \$50 million line item in FY 2025 to fund critical maintenance needs in the county's 20 public schools.

Like the courthouse expenditures, issuing debt to fund the school maintenance projects would require holding a referendum under the county's current fiscal policies. The school board would first need to vote to request the referendum, and discussions are still in their early stages. The \$50 million would not include funds for repairing and upgrading school sports facilities, estimated to cost another \$27 million.

The revised five-year CIP would also move up several long-planned construction items, increasing to \$149 million the total capital expenditures from the \$135 million included in McCulla's original proposal.

Revisions include changes to the following items:

- **Marshall fire station:** Moved up two years, now scheduled to begin engineering in FY 2025 and construction in FY 2026
- **The Plains fire station:** Moved up one year, now scheduled to begin engineering in FY 2026 and construction in FY 2027.
- **Upperville fire station:** Moved up one year, now scheduled to begin engineering in FY 2027.
- **Central library:** Moved up one year, now scheduled to begin engineering in FY 2024 and construction in FY 2025.
- **New Baltimore library:** Moved into the five-year CIP for the first time, now scheduled to begin engineering in FY 2026 and construction in FY 2027.
- **Central Sports Complex (phase 2):** Moved up one year, now scheduled to begin engineering in FY 2023 and construction in FY 2024.
- **Marshall waste collection site:** Moved up one year, now scheduled to begin engineering in FY 2023 and construction in FY 2024.

Three other major items included in the current five-year CIP remain on schedule.

The long-anticipated renovation and expansion of Taylor Middle School will receive \$36 million in funding in FY 2023. Engineering costs for a planned fire station in Bealeton will be funded with \$300,000 in FY 2023, and \$4.4 million in construction funding in FY 2024. Finally, the revised plan allocates \$500,000 in FY 2026 to engineer a renovation and expansion project for the sheriff's office building in Warrenton, with \$4 million allocated the following year for construction costs.

Reach Coy Ferrell at cferrell@fauquier.com