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FEATURED

Probation officer funding issues spark public safety tax discussion

By Ernest Rollins 812-331-4357 | erollins@heraldt.com 16 hrs ago



Monroe County Courthouse

What's next

The Monroe County Council will continue hearing 2018 budget requests from department heads in the coming days and weeks. The day-by-day schedule of departments presenting proposals

A request to move the funding of a probation officer position to Monroe County's public safety local income tax fund sparked discussion about spending priorities for those tax dollars, and the overall condition of user fee funds.

At a county 2018 budget hearing Monday, Chief Probation Officer Linda Brady told the Monroe County Council her department is

for the 2018 Monroe County budget is as follows, with all meetings starting at 5 p.m. in the Nat U. Hill meeting room of the county courthouse:

- Thursday: Highway/public works department, parks department, surveyor's office, prosecutor's office.
- Sept. 18: Commissioners' office, emergency management, human resources, veterans affairs, planning department, legal department, technical services.
- Sept. 21: Assessor's office, aviation department, auditor's office, treasurer's office, county council office.
- Immediately after the departmental hearings conclude on Sept. 21, the council will have a budget hearing.
- Oct. 16: First reading of budget adoption.
- Oct. 18: Second reading of budget adoption.

requesting that one probation officer position be moved from the court, alcohol and drug fees fund — which is supported by fees collected through the county's alcohol and drug program — and funded using public safety local income tax dollars.

She said revenue in the fund continues to decline, and it is being projected that it will be in the red by July 2018. The fund helps pay for four probation officer positions, with personnel being the lion's share of its \$291,709 budget. Brady said moving one position will help sustain that fund.

"We have a major source of revenue that is evaporating very quickly," county council member Eric Spoonmore said.

Deputy Chief Probation Officer Troy Hatfield said declining revenue is likely due to a number of factors, including fewer offenders being sent to alcohol and drug programs.

Additionally, Hatfield said, the county's pilot pretrial services program will likely affect revenue going into this fund in the future. Monroe County's is one of 11 pilot programs created based on directions from the Indiana Supreme Court.

In a memo to the council, Hatfield said cash bonds are often put toward fees such as those in the alcohol and drug program. But one of the pretrial program's goals is moving away from using money as a factor in determining whether a person stays in jail until a case is resolved, to a more risk-based assessment system. He said by 2020, it will be required that all Indiana counties have pretrial services programs.

"Thus, if cash bond utilization decreases, and alcohol and drug program services fees are often paid using a cash bond, then the likelihood of the user fee being paid also decreases," Hatfield said in the memo.

He said this does not mean the pretrial program does not contribute some good to the community. For example, county council member Ryan Cobine said the program helps the county to have fewer people incarcerated simply because they lack money to pay bail.

County council member Lee Jones said a number of user fee-supported funds are seeing similar drops in funding over time, but are not in as bad a shape as the court, alcohol and drug fees fund. Brady said courts around the state rely on user fees to operate, and that as the shift away from cash bonds and the roll-out of pretrial services programs occurs, dependence on user fees will become less reliable and alternate sources of funding will

need to be sought.

Council member Geoff McKim pointed to funding from pretrial diversions as another example of a user fee fund that is seeing less revenue over time.

Brady said there is discussion at the Indiana Statehouse on this issue, and on what role the state can play to help communities facing a drop in user fees to help fund their operations.

While some council members favor funding the probation officer position out of public safety local income tax dollars as a solution, council member Marty Hawk has some concerns about using that particular pot of money.

She said there is still some uncertainty regarding the county's 2018 allocation of those tax dollars. Hawk said city officials seem supportive of allocating more than 29 percent of public safety local income tax revenue coming into Monroe County for the combined emergency dispatch center. This distribution comes off the top, and therefore affects the remaining revenue then allocated to the city, towns and county.

Hawk said the county and city agreed not to change the allocation amount of 29 percent to the dispatch center after July 1. But the proposed dispatch center budget of \$2.87 million, if approved by the Monroe County Income Tax Council, will exceed that allocation amount.

Additionally, the Monroe County Income Tax Council Public Safety Local Income Tax Committee, charged with recommending to the income tax council how public safety local income tax dollars are distributed among the various governmental and public safety entities, recommended fully funding dispatch's 2018 request.

McKim said with that request, the allocation to the dispatch center would be closer to 36 percent of the total pot, which is estimated to be around \$7.8 million in 2018, and would be an increase of about \$321,000 over 2017 distributions.

Despite dispatch potentially receiving more tax dollars, McKim said, the county could still see a surplus of around \$554,000 in public safety local income tax revenue, based on anticipated revenues exceeding county departments' \$1.85 million request for funding.

Nonetheless, Hawk said that if the county public safety local income tax budget continues to support more ongoing expenses,

it will become more difficult to save a large portion to move forward with a strategy to address public safety issues such as an overcrowded jail.

The Monroe County Income Tax Council, made up of the Bloomington City Council, the county council and the Ellettsville and Stinesville town councils, has yet to vote on the public safety local income tax allocations for 2018. To do so, each fiscal body will have to approve the same resolution, with an approval by a fiscal body equivalent to its casting its allotted votes, based on population, on the income tax council.

The Bloomington City Council has the simple majority, with 59 votes; the county has 34; Ellettsville has five; and Stinesville, because of its low population, is a nonvoting member.

Ernest Rollins

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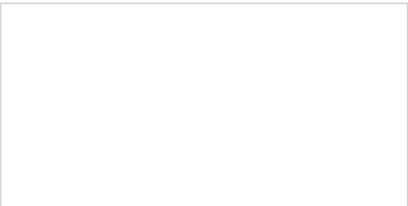
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