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FEATURED

Declining fee revenue forces probation officials to seek alternative funding options

By Ernest Rollins 812-331-4357 | erollins@heraldt.com Sep 5, 2018



Linda Brady, chief probation officer for Monroe County

Jeff Schemmer

Declining user fee revenues continue to be a budgeting concern for probation and community corrections officials.

Two probation officer positions previously supported by the court, alcohol and drug fees fund were moved to the county general fund on Tuesday, the first day of the 2019 county council budget work

sessions.

Chief Probation Officer Linda Brady said the court, alcohol and drug fees fund — which is supported by fees collected when someone commits a drug or alcohol-related offense — can no longer fund two probation officer positions. As a result, officials turned to tax-supported funds to cover some expenses next year. Along with moving two probation officer positions to county general, the county council also preliminarily approved paying for electronic monitoring expenses.

County Councilman Geoff McKim said court officials have made the case that court user fees are no longer capable of sustaining certain operations. Additionally, he said having tax-supported funds, like the general fund, aid in covering some of those expenses is a worthwhile investment.

“We all say we are for alternatives to incarceration and this is kind of where the rubber hits the road,” McKim said.

Court officials ran into similar challenges during last year’s budget session when they requested a probation officer position be moved to public safety local income tax fund. At one point, Brady said fees collected in that fund were able to support seven probation officer positions. Now, only one position remains.

Brady said user fees have not kept pace with expenses. For example, Tom Rhodes, community corrections director and assistant chief probation officer for Monroe County, said the department is using more global positions satellite monitoring technology to keep tabs on offenders which is a much costlier expense. As part of the 2019 budget, electronic monitoring costs are \$160,000.

Another factor officials believe is impacting user fees is its participation in a pilot pretrial diversion program. Cash bonds are one source of user fees. However, one of the goals of a pretrial diversion program is to move away from the cash bond system.

Monroe is one of 11 Indiana counties participating in a pilot pretrial services program. The Indiana Supreme Court designated Monroe as one of the pilot counties with the intention of expanding the program statewide by 2020. Brady said while the pretrial services program has its benefits it did cut into a revenue source for operations.

“I think everybody knew it could happen,” Brady said.

Along with moving positions and some equipment costs out of court user fee funds, officials also

made cuts or reduced budget lines to control costs. One major cost-saving effort was to eliminate the county's road crew program, which was first implemented in 1983. Troy Hatfield, deputy chief probation officer, said discontinuing the program saves around \$50,000.

County council members will continue deliberating the 2019 budget requests from departments this week. McKim said he estimates council is starting this year's budget sessions about with \$521,000 more being requested over projected revenues. However, McKim said there are a number of items double budgeted as department heads turn to council to determine which pot of money is most appropriate for an expense.

Budget schedule

The Monroe County Council will meet over the next two weeks to discuss the 2019 Monroe County budget. The day-by-day schedule of departments presenting proposals for the 2019 Monroe County budget is as follows, with all meetings taking place in the Nat U. Hill room of the county courthouse in downtown Bloomington:

Wednesday, 5 p.m.: Opening remarks, veterans' affairs, human resources, emergency management, legal, building commission, technical services, highway and commissioners' office.

Thursday, 5 p.m.: Opening remarks, planning, public defender, prosecutor, assessor's office, council, sheriff's office, jail and Public Safety Local Income Tax Fund.

Sept. 12, 5 p.m.: Opening remarks, treasurer's office, health department, extension services, coroner's office, recorder's office, aviation department, fair board, Monroe County Convention and Visitor's Center and final budget session discussions.

Ernest Rollins

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