



Published Saturday, Nov. 05, 2011

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Benton Franklin Health Board's budget balanced - for now

By Michelle Dupler, Tri-City Herald

The budget presented to the Benton Franklin Health Board on Friday was balanced without staff layoffs -- but that may be only a temporary achievement.

Looming state budget cuts are likely to affect the bottom line, and Benton and Franklin county commissioners are questioning their own contributions to the district.

The \$8.8 million budget relies on more than \$4 million in state and federal grants and more than \$1 million in local government assistance money from the state's motor vehicle excise tax.

Several of those sources -- including the local government assistance -- are offered for at least partial reductions in the preliminary list Gov. Chris Gregoire released this past week in preparation for her supplemental budget proposal later this month.

Cuts could be in the hundreds of thousands, or upwards of \$1 million, depending on the action the Legislature takes in a special session starting Nov. 28, and when lawmakers expect to have to balance a \$2 billion deficit.

The district's budget leaves \$500,000 in reserves.

The counties are working to balance their own budgets with declining revenues and higher costs to do business, and reducing their contributions to the health district may be on the table, said Benton County Commissioner Leo Bowman, also a health board member.

The budget reflects about a \$30,000 cut in what Franklin County contributes to the district, which prompted Benton County commissioners to suggest they also may reduce their payment.

But Franklin County Commissioner Brad Peck said it wasn't an intentional move to reduce county expenses.

Peck said he believed the lower number reflected Franklin County's per capita proportion based on the latest census numbers.

But Benton County Commissioner Jim Beaver said he thought the counties paid a percentage, not a population-based contribution.

The two sets of commissioners agreed to have their county administrators re-examine the formula and determine the correct number.

But each county said it likely would make cuts if the other one did.

Also Friday, the health board agreed to sign a lease with Grace Clinic for the district's old building on Canal Drive.

The lease calls for Grace Clinic to pay market rent of \$60,000 per year, but allows the clinic to offset the rental amount with the value of improvements the clinic makes to the building and health care services it provides.

Grace Clinic offers free medical, dental and mental health care to people with incomes below 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines, or less than \$44,700 a year for a family of four.

Clinic officials plan to open at the new location in March.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2011/11/05/1706040/benton-franklin-health-boards.html#ixzz1d2ztEIJc>