

Fresno County supervisors quickly approve \$2 billion-plus budget

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Fresno County supervisors approved the county's \$2 billion-plus budget Thursday in five minutes, with only a brief diversion to discuss incentives and starting pay hikes for patrol deputies.

The five-minute meeting occurred three days after the county spent barely more than two hours — the fastest budget hearing in recent memory — discussing the budget.

Board members thanked staff and County Administrative Officer John Navarrette, who led the crafting of his final budget before his retirement in October.

"You've done an extraordinarily great job over the years," Buddy Mendes told Navarrette, "no matter what anybody says, (it's) one of the toughest jobs in the world."

Board Chairwoman Debbie Pochigian thanked the county's employees and said the budget was certainly made easier by not having departments competing for dollars.

"After seven years of pinching pennies and scrutinizing every dollar, I am pleased the last one had a little more breathing room," she said.

Supervisors Henry R. Perea and Andreas Borgeas requested further discussion on the incentives and higher pay for new patrol deputies. The Sheriff's Office plans to pay signing bonuses of about \$5,000 for the dozen or so who have pending job offers and also to deputies hired in the future.

Last year, the Sheriff's Office hired 38 patrol deputies, but 34 left for other jobs, retired or were fired.

"We are competing, board, with many agencies statewide as everybody is starting to hire," Sheriff Margaret Mims told supervisors on Monday.

The county's generous retirement system used to lure new recruits, but changes reduced retirement benefits, she said.

Supervisors wanted the incentive program to ensure that the county can match other law enforcement agencies that offer similar incentives, including the Fresno Police Department.

Mims told supervisors Monday that there are 28 vacancies for patrol deputies.

Navarrette said there may be enough money in the sheriff's budget to initially pay for the program, and one-time money expected from the state in July will help pay for the program in the future.

He said the board could discuss the issue again Tuesday, but he's discussed the incentive program with Mims and the Fresno Deputy Sheriff's Association and expects "quick progress."

A staff recommendation on hiring incentive is expected to be presented to the supervisors in August.

Overall, the county budget will add 116 positions, about half of those in the sheriff's office. There will be 52 new staff members at the jail, including 49 correctional officers.

The starting wage for patrol deputies is about \$42,000 per year. Supervisors are discussing setting a higher starting wage.

Pay for employees in other law enforcement services jobs, such as those in the district attorney's office, public defender's office, county counsel and probation department, also may rise as supervisors try to stay competitive with other counties.

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