

'BITE THE BULLET'



Daily News/Elisabeth Waldon

The Montcalm County Administrative Building in Stanton was built in 1910 and originally served as the county courthouse. The current building was funded by a voter-approved bond in 1907 and constructed after a 1905 fire that destroyed the county's first courthouse.

Montcalm County commissioners prepare to make budget cuts

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STANTON — Budget cuts are coming to Montcalm County.

The question is, how and where?

Voters turned down a Headlee override millage proposal on March 8 by 58 to 42 percent. If it had been approved, the funds would have gone toward balancing the county's \$230,000 budget deficit as well as restoring some county services.

Now what?

Outgoing Controller-Administrator Chris Hyzer presented a concerning scenario during the county's Economic Development & Physical Resources Committee meeting Monday.

Hyzer said although recent changes in county employee health insurance will save almost \$125,000, the county needs to switch to a better email service (a cost of about \$50,000) and the Mid-Michigan District Health Department needs a new roof (a cost of \$60,000 to

\$80,000), leaving the deficit right back where it started (*see accompanying story below*).

Board Chairman Patrick Q. Carr said the county just needs to "bite the bullet" and make about half a million dollars in cuts.

"We need to make some really significant changes," he said. "We need a new business model. We don't have the revenue anymore to operate the model that we all know. We've been kind of able to keep a lid on day to day operations by kicking the can down the road, but we can't continue to do that. Fund equity isn't going to support that much longer."

"This \$75,000 (health department) roof," he continued. "That's one of those things we've put off for the last several years since we've been operating this way. Now it's fix it or lose that whole building. The police cars have way too many miles on them. We just haven't had the money to do any of those other projects. We need to

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The Montcalm County Administrative Building in Stanton houses the Building Department, Clerk's Office, Treasurer's Office, Drain Commissioner's Office and Register of Deeds Office, among others.

BUDGET CUTS

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make a significant change on what our operation looks like. It isn't going to be any fun and somebody is going to lose their job, but I don't see that we have any choice."

Carr suggested making an equal amount of cuts across the board at all county departments, using a percentage to ensure no one department is hit harder than the others.

Commissioners discussed whether attrition could help with the cuts. Hyzer said jail and sheriff's employees retire more reliably than other county employees, but it's difficult to project.

"We're operating on a shoestring," said Commissioner Ron Retzlaff. "It's nice if we can figure out when somebody might retire, but we have no guarantees. Their situation may change. I don't think we can operate on that assumption. I think we need to make our decision, as much as any one of us hates to do it. Nothing's going to get better until it's done."

"Tough choices are just going to have to be made," Carr agreed. "There isn't any way around it."

Register of Deeds Lori Wilson noted the Montcalm County Administrative Building was built in 1910 to replace the original courthouse which burned down in 1905. Montcalm County voters approved a bond in 1907 to fund construction of the facility.

The failed Headlee millage would have — if approved — helped fund multiple capital improvements to the aging building.

"The people of Montcalm County in 1907 voted yes to build this building, but yet they'd vote no to restore it and

MONTCALM COUNTY NUMBERS FROM RECENT YEARS

- **\$230,000:** Montcalm County's current budget deficit for 2015-2016.
- **58 percent:** The percentage of Montcalm County voters who voted against the Headlee override millage on March 8, which would have helped balance the county's budget and restored some county services.
- **\$200,000:** Montcalm County's budget deficit for 2014-2015.
- **\$40,000:** Amount that Montcalm County's budget was in the black for 2013-2014.
- **\$733,000:** Montcalm County's budget deficit for 2012-2013, which led to commissioners eliminating their own health insurance and county employees being required to take five furlough days, meaning county offices were closed for business those days, among other cuts.
- **\$1.3 million:** Montcalm County's budget deficit for 2011-2012, which led to the end of 24/7 sheriff's deputy road patrol, the elimination of the county's animal control director and the reduction of the county's 4-H coordinator from full-time to part-time, among other cuts.
- **52 percent:** The percentage of Montcalm County voters who voted against a sheriff's department millage proposal in 2012, which would have restored 24/7 road patrol.
- **\$800,000:** Montcalm County's budget deficit for 2010-2011, which led to multiple personnel and wage reductions in 10 county departments, as well as for commissioners, and the elimination of an Animal Control officer, among other cuts.
- **\$350,000:** Montcalm County's budget deficit in 2009-2010, which led to the Board of Commissioners deciding to have one full board meeting per month instead of two in order to help save costs.

keep it," Wilson said. "The walls are falling. One day I came to work and the ceiling fell down in front of me. The windows are horrible. If people came in and saw how bad this building is and the needs that it has ... someday we're going to be forced to close it if we can't take care of it."

Commissioner John Johansen said he attended a Montcalm Township Board meeting the day after the failed Headlee vote. He and the board and audience members discussed the issue at length.

Johansen said he thought Hyzer and The Daily News did a good job of getting the word out about the ballot proposal, but he believes the majority of voters who went to the polls had no idea the proposal was on the ballot and subsequently voted against it.

Johansen believes the county needs to present another millage proposal to voters and work on getting the word out

more.

"I firmly believe that we have to ask the residents at some point down the road for additional funding for the county," he said. "These are county facilities. These are an asset of every resident of this county. They're also a liability of every resident of this county. That point didn't come across."

However, Carr disagreed with the notion of returning to the voters.

"We can't continue to ask that question and get shot down," he said. "I think asking for that all the time has some consequences."

Hyzer will present some budget cut options at a special finance committee meeting scheduled for 9 a.m. Monday at the Montcalm County Administrative Building. Anyone may attend.

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