

Headline: Los Angeles County budget seeing improvement
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For the first time in five years, Los Angeles County government is poised to propose a budget without drastic cuts, marking a turning point since the Great Recession.

County managers are still crunching the final numbers for fiscal year 2013-14, which will be released April 15, but spokesman David Sommers said the outlook is positive - for a change.

"You're not going to see the cuts and you're not going to see a deficit like you've seen in the last several years," he said. "This is a budget that gets us back to where we were before the recession."

"We have weathered the storm," Sommers added.

Currently, the county budget is about \$25 billion. Sommers said during the worst of the economic crisis, some departments, like Human Resources, and the Treasurer and Tax Collector, saw their funding shrink as much as 30 percent.

Steve Whitmore, spokesman for Sheriff Lee Baca, said the Sheriff's Department endured cuts ranging from \$100 million to \$140 million during each of the last three years.

For the upcoming fiscal year, however, the agency is proposing a budget of \$2.8 billion, up slightly from its current allocation of \$2.7 billion.

A portion of the money will be used to implement some of the reforms recommended by the Commission

on Jail Violence, such as the creation of an Office of Inspector General.

"The sheriff is very gratified the

county Board of Supervisors is going to make this financial commitment to jail reforms," Whitmore said. "We couldn't do it without their help."

Miriam Krinsky, the commission's executive director, noted the county has paid out millions of dollars in settlements over abuse at the jails and would benefit from the investment in reforms.

"At the end of the day, investing in enhanced accountability measures and other positive changes within the Sheriff's Department isn't simply the right thing to do, but also in the long run a fiscally prudent decision as well," she said.

Meanwhile, county Fire Chief Daryl Osby said his department's proposed \$920 million budget is \$35 million less than last year because "we're still trying to live within our means."

He explained that even though revenue from property taxes has been going up since last year, the department lost more than \$270 million in revenue since 2008.

"We're postponing long-term infrastructure needs like replacing our headquarters and fire stations until our revenue catches up with our expenditures," Osby said.

He stressed the belt-tightening has not slowed down emergency response.

"We have no reductions in staffing and all our 171 fire stations are open, so we've been able to endure the economic downturn without having an impact on our service," Osby said.

The Probation Department, on the other hand, is proposing a budget of \$822 million, up from \$716 million, according to Assistant Chief Probation Officer Don Meyer.

The increase was primarily state funding for AB 109, also known as realignment, which made county probation officers, instead of state parole officers, responsible for supervising certain felons released from state prison.

"Although there is an improvement, there are still significant gaps in services that still exist from prior budget reductions," Meyer said.

Nevertheless, he added, "Our budget has overall stability."

Robert Stern, former president of the Center for Governmental Studies, noted that while some local governments, like the cities of San Bernardino and Stockton, ended up filing for bankruptcy during the recession, Los Angeles County emerged relatively intact.

It did not even resort to mass layoffs or furloughs, unlike the city of Los Angeles.

"I've been very impressed with the county because they didn't go on a spending spree during the good times and didn't have to cut employees during the bad times," Stern said. "It shows the board took a very

responsible long-term approach and they deserve some credit."

Sommers agreed the board's fiscally conservative policies, including funding the reserve and rainy day funds "before doing anything else," were critical.

He said because several members of the board have been working together since the 1990s and won't be forced out by term limits for a few more years, they had a "long-term vision," knowing they would be "here to see the outcomes of their actions."

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who plans to retire in 2014, said the board should continue this approach.

"The reason we've been able to navigate this recession without layoffs and furloughs is because we don't spend in the good years things we can't sustain in the lean years," he said. "We need to continue to sustain that fiscal management, so we don't get into the situations that other cities have gotten into by spending everything they have when they have it."

But Stern believes that's easier for a supervisor to do than, say, a mayor or city council member.

"Supervisors can afford to be a little bit nonresponsive to the unions, and nonresponsive to the public, and have this even keel (in budgeting) because they really don't have to look over their shoulder for re-election purposes," Stern said. "It's very hard to defeat them, and very few of them run opposed."

Other factors that put the county in the black this fiscal year are the economic recovery, which boosted property and sales tax revenues; a stellar credit rating that allowed it to borrow money at lower interest rates; and an "efficiency initiative" that saved \$255 million through such common sense measures as programming office lights to turn off at night, Sommers said.

There are significant new expenses, however, such as the jail reforms and legally mandated upgrades to storm channels.

Also, under a state Supreme Court order, the county must reimburse several cities tens of millions of dollars for improperly keeping a portion of their tax revenue for years.

Yaroslavsky said the county should work on bringing services back as soon as it can.

"We've taken a lot of cuts in the last four to five years, during this recession, and a lot of damage was done to the operations of the county," he said. "We need to get busy about restoring services."

Whitmore said budget cuts forced the sheriff to cut patrols to unincorporated areas, but those have since been restored. Sheriff's academy classes were cancelled for a time, but no longer.

To save money, the Sheriff's Department implemented an early release program so inmates meeting certain requirements served only a portion of their sentence - in some cases, only 10 percent.

Department staff was also required to cover for colleagues, to avoid overtime. Whitmore said Baca himself worked a patrol shift in East L.A. and worked security on a train to cut costs.

Whitmore said he hopes these will be addressed when funding becomes available.

As for the Fire Department, Osby is saving up to renovate or replace its headquarters.

"It's bad," he said ruefully. "It's about 70 years old and doesn't even meet earthquake standards."

Osby said the department also needs to upgrade or replace helicopters, firetrucks, and its 20-year-old dispatch system.

"Once revenue streams allow it, then we plan to address those concerns," he said.