

COUNTY TAX INCREASE MOVES FORWARD - COMMISSIONERS CALL FOR MORE BUDGET CUTS

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***Author:** Andy Reid Staff Writer ; Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.*

Despite growing concerns from business leaders and residents, Palm Beach County commissioners Tuesday agreed to move forward with increasing property tax rates as much as 15 percent.

That could still change by September, when commissioners give final approval to next year's budget and tax rate. Commissioners on Tuesday called for exploring deeper budget cuts to try to lessen the proposed tax increase.

The struggling economy leaves the county facing a drop in revenue and a worsening budget shortfall. Commissioners contend that will require a tax increase to keep providing county services.

Just how much has yet to be finalized. The commission on Tuesday agreed to the maximum tax rate they would consider, but they could still cut that rate in September.

If given final approval, the property tax rate would go from \$3.78 per \$1,000 of taxable value to \$4.34. For a home valued at about \$230,000 and eligible for a \$50,000 homestead exemption, that would equate to about \$800 in county property taxes next year.

That would translate to about \$100 more than this year. That \$800 doesn't include taxes for cities, schools and other government agencies.

The tax increase would still come with deep county budget cuts. The county envisions laying off about 200 employees.

About 100 more employees could be lost to a new early retirement program. County departments were directed to cut costs by 10 percent.

Commissioners Steven Abrams and Shelley Vana cast the only votes against setting the maximum tax rate at \$4.34 per \$1,000. They supported starting at a maximum of \$4.29 and looking for ways to cut deeper.

"There is some in-between," said Vana, who called for the commission to "find some middle ground."

Commissioner Burt Aaronson said cutting much deeper could hurt services that residents expect, including parks, lifeguards, median landscaping and the Sheriff's

Office.

Aaronson, along with commissioners Jess Santamaria, Jeff Koons, Priscilla Taylor and Karen Marcus, voted for the proposed \$4.34 rate, while also agreeing to consider more cuts to potentially lower the cost.

"We have a problem," Aaronson said. "We have to come up with something."

The Realtors Association of the Palm Beaches opposed the tax rate that association representatives said would increase the burden on homeowners already struggling due to the economy.

"Have the courage to make the reductions to the budget that are necessary," said Jayne Stroshein-Rousseau of the association.

Residents suffering from job losses and struggling to pay their bills can't afford any tax increase, said Kevin Kent, the association's incoming president.

"There are still more foreclosures on the horizon," he said.

The Coalition of Boynton West Residential Association, known as **COBWRA**, joined the call for deeper budget cuts to ease the tax increase.

Cutting everything from beach re-nourishment work to overtime costs at the Sheriff's Office are among ways to save money and lessen the tax increase, **COBWRA** President Ken Lassiter said.

"Do not just raise the taxes as high as you can," Lassiter said.

Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.

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