

No tax hike

Highlands County millage to stay at, below 8.55

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — County property owners won't see higher taxes this year, at least not from the county. County commissioners voted Tuesday to hold the county property tax at 8.55 mills for the 2021-22 fiscal year, the same rate as this year. Property owners should expect to see an explanation of that rate soon in the Truth in Millage (TRIM)

notices put out by the Highlands County Tax Collector. Typically, according to County Administrator Randy Vosburg, county staff recommends a rate slightly above the current rate to give commissioners the option of raising a rate slightly to cover budget increases. David Nitz, manager of the Office of Budget and Management, recommended setting the top rate at 9.0 last summer, and commissioners chose to cut enough from the budget to keep it at

8.55 mills. Vosburg said it was a "big step for David (Nitz) to set it so low." Commissioner Arlene Tuck said she would have preferred to set the ceiling rate lower than that. Commissioners won't have the option of raising the millage rate above 8.55 at this point unless they want to run the risk of not being able to re-advertise the rate in time for the September budget

MILLAGE | 4A

Inside today

The 30th annual Caladium Festival opens Friday in Lake Placid. The three-day event takes place in downtown Lake Placid.

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Lake Placid budget hearings start this evening

By JOHN GUERRA
STAFF WRITER

LAKE PLACID — The Town Council will discuss its proposed \$6 million budget tonight, starting a usually quick process of setting the town's spending for the next fiscal year. Combined governmental expenses in the proposed budget are set at \$6,039,089, a \$294,565 decrease from last year's expenses, which were \$6,333,654.

Town Council proposed a property tax rate of 3.2540 for next fiscal year, reducing it from this year's rate of 3.3250.

The next fiscal year begins Oct. 1, so the council hopes to finalize the budget by its Aug. 9 regular meeting and pass it on second reading at the council's Sept. 13 regular meeting, Finance Director Rachel Osborne said.

"We hold public hearings and encourage people to attend to see what they'd like in the budget."

Salary increases are among the largest hits to the budget, Osborne said. This year, salaries came to \$1.78 million but in the year starting Oct. 1, the town expects to spend \$1.916 million, a proposed increase of \$138,825.

One reason salaries are higher: Voters passed a statewide minimum wage law that is to be phased in over several years.

"The town is raising the salaries of 10 people to meet those wage requirements," she said, adding that more employees will be brought to minimum wage in the next budget.

But minimum wage rules are not the sole driver of the town's salary increases. Annual pay increases and the creation of a new public works position also raised salary costs.

The Lake Placid Police Department could receive \$11,474.54 in raises if the council approves the department's \$420,363 request for salaries next year. This year's salaries were \$408,888.

The department estimates its overtime will reach \$12,000 next year; the department's overtime request in 2020-21 was \$9,524, but it was not spent, the budget shows.

Next year's budget document highlights rate increases in three areas: Florida Retirement System payments,

BUDGET | 4A

DuVall retires from EMS; marks end of an era



COURTESY PHOTO/HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSION

Highlands County EMS Capt. Lance DuVall wipes away tears as his wife, Highlands County 911 Dispatcher Nancy DuVall, gives him his farewell radio page-out at the end of his last shift before retirement. 'On behalf of your family, we love you, we are very proud of you and we are thankful for the extra time we get to spend with you,' Nancy DuVall said.



COURTESY PHOTO/HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSION

From left: Highlands County Fire Rescue Chief Marc Bashoor congratulates Capt. Lance DuVall on the morning before his retirement from Highlands County Emergency Medical Services. DuVall, with 33 years as a paramedic in Florida, worked the last 25 years with Highlands County.

County gearing up for new HCFR chief

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — When Highlands County said a heartfelt farewell this month to EMS Capt. Lance DuVall, they also said a good-bye to one of the last volunteer first responders in the county.

DuVall started in Highlands County as a volunteer in 1988. He was hired full time in January of 1996.

He logged 25 years with Highlands County Emergency Medical Services — a total of 33 years as a paramedic in Florida — encompassing transport of 270,000 Highlands County patients, 90,000 of which were during his shift, along with 74,000 hours of shift time and at least 25,000 hours of overtime.

County officials debated on whether or not to let him off of his last shift, set to end on a morning. However, at the county meeting where they honored him, they quipped that they saw too much overtime on the books lately,

which was taken by him and others in good jest.

In a farewell radio-broadcast page out at the end of his last shift, 7 a.m. July 7, his wife, Nancy — a Highlands County 911 dispatcher — thanked him publicly on behalf of Highlands County Fire Rescue, Highlands County Sheriff's Office Consolidated Dispatch and many previous coworkers for his years of service and for "compassion for others and leadership" in serving EMS and the community.

"On behalf of your family, we love you, we are very proud of you and we are thankful for the extra time we get to spend with you," Nancy DuVall said. "It was always fun telling you where to go, but it was also my pleasure and an honor to share the radio with my husband for 22 years."

At which point, Lance DuVall, being filmed by county officials, got misty-eyed and thanked those around him.

When honored by HCFR Chief Marc Bashoor and the Board of County

Commissioners during the July 6 commission meeting, the morning before that last shift, DuVall told the Highlands News-Sun that he had enjoyed training in most of the current EMS corps.

His advice to anyone coming up through the ranks behind him was to trust their employees to do their jobs.

As for what he had enjoyed most over the last 25-33 years and what kept him going?

"Helping people," DuVall said. "I know it sounds corny, but it's true."

His retirement marks another milestone in a steady transition of Highlands County's emergency services from largely volunteer-run to a service that merges full-time paid personnel with volunteer organizations, which still retain identity of their communities: Lake Placid, Placid Lakes, Leisure Lakes, Highlands Lakes, Highlands Park Estates, Venus, Florida,

DUVALL | 4A

New administrative positions concern School Board member

By MARC VALERO
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Longtime School Board Member Donna Howerton voiced her concerns recently of the growing number of administrative positions.

At a recent meeting, Howerton said the number of administrators is getting to the level when Wally Cox was superintendent. Cox was Superintendent Brenda Longshore's predecessor.

She noted that a recently retired administrator, Anne Lindsay, was listed on the superintendent's personnel recommendations as a part-time hourly administrator. Howerton requested communication on these positions.



HOWERTON

"I know your thoughts are to do what is best for the kids, but if you can just bring something to us if you are going to be using that position," she said.

Longshore responded she would be glad to inform the board. There have been a few individuals that have been in those types of positions to help out and support special projects and there has been one administrator who has come back to help with that process.

School Board Chair Jan Shoop said that in Lindsay's situation, she brings a depth of knowledge.

The board approved the superintendent's personnel recommendations by a 4-0 vote. Jill Compton-Twist was absent from the meeting.

Recently Howerton said she was getting some concerns because after Longshore became the

superintendent in November 2016, she cut a few administrative positions while adding responsibilities to other positions with a pay increase.

Now it is back to being similar to Cox's organizational chart, filling the positions plus those who had their salaries raised.

Howerton said she has been hearing from people that [the administration] may be getting a "little top heavy" at the district office.

At a March 2017 School Board workshop, Longshore said the reorganization would improve communication and department support. Also, it would reduce salary costs to increase the district's fund balance (budget reserves) after the district was "very close to a financial emergency" in 2015.

Longshore's district office

reorganization plan was approved by the board in March with a 3-2 vote after much discussion centering on the plan's two additional higher paying assistant superintendent positions.

Howerton and Compton-Twist had voted against the reorganization plan.

Now Howerton noted the district added an ESE coordinator position in addition to the ESE director position. Federal Programs is now a director position after being filled by a resource teacher. The position of Human Resources director was also brought back recently. Highlands Virtual School is now led by a principal position, which now oversees the Academy at Youth Care Home, Howerton added.

"I am good with it as long as it is giving help in the classroom to our teachers and to our kids," Howerton said.



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Good morning To
Fred Nelius
Thanks for reading!

