

Dixon says Van Wert County budget good — so far

Written by Ed

Friday, October 11, 2013 12:00 AM -

BY ED GEBERT

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VAN WERT — After nine months, the Van Wert County budget looks to be in good shape, according to County Auditor Nancy Dixon.

Dixon gave a report at the Thursday morning meeting of the county department heads. She did note that the \$365,000 penalty given the county by the State of Ohio is having a huge effect on the budget. Those funds are included in the 2014 budget under expenses but County Commissioner Thad Lichtensteiger revealed that there is hope growing that the money will be covered by insurance.

“We still have that huge \$365,000 obligation hanging over our heads, and that’s a huge difference-maker for us because we got a little bit of a chirp from our risk-liability insurance carrier... that they are preparing a document for us to sign. So we’re getting the chirp that perhaps they are going to cover that,” said Lichtensteiger. “And that’s enough of a difference-maker that it moves us from \$180,000 in the red to \$180,000 in the black just by that one decision there.”

The \$365,000 penalty was the state asking for federal funds back from the completed sewer project on U.S. 127 and St. Rd. 118 south of Van Wert. The money was used correctly and the project was successfully completed but a piece of paperwork was not filed in a timely manner. Despite the state releasing the funds to the county, an auditor found that the deadline for returning a request for the funds was missed. Since this spring, the commissioners have been appealing to state and federal agencies, as well as talking to political leaders, to find some way

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to negate the penalty. A payment plan has been scheduled for 2014 with the majority of the balance backloaded while more efforts to negate the fine are made.

If Lichtensteiger is correct that the insurer may cover the amount, the county's financial situation will greatly improve.

"We're hopeful that in the next month we will see some positive outcome from that," he commented.

Commissioner Stan Owens added that even if the insurance claim is not paid, "We're not just going to walk away when we feel we have a legal avenue to pursue. We're not just going to walk away from it because we feel they definitely should pay it."

Another major financial consideration is health insurance for county employees. The commissioners have been working for months looking for a better rate. The county's insurance has been with a five-county consortium for at least 20 years but have not found comparable coverage at a lower price. However, this year, Lichtensteiger noted a few insurance quotes that could save the county significantly. One possibility could cut the insurance funding from a projected \$2.25 million for the year down to \$1.5-\$1.75 million.

"We could save some serious money next year," Lichtensteiger declared. "We're doing a lot of research and a lot of due diligence before we make an ultimate decision. We'd like to save a bunch of money for the county but we'd also like to be able to save the employees some money. I think that's our ultimate goal."

Those numbers could drop even farther with the use of private exchanges but those proposals are still under investigation. Another idea being floated to cut expenses is to offer a higher deductible but offer to pay the additional deductible out of county funds. In most cases, employees do not go over the current deductible.

"We are trying to be innovative and look at all avenues and lower our costs, and the employee's costs if possible," Owens stated."