BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
STAFFORD, VIRGINIA
MINUTES
CIP AND GENERAL FUND REVIEW
BUDGET WORK SESSION
MARCH 22, 2022

CALL TO ORDER – A work session of the Stafford County Board of Supervisors was called to order by Crystal Vanuch, Chairman, at 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, March 22, 2022, in Meeting Room ABC, George L. Gordon, Jr. Government Center, 1300 Courthouse Road, Stafford VA.

ROLL CALL – The following members were present: Crystal Vanuch, Chairman; Pamela Yeung, Vice Chairman; Tinesha Allen; Meg Bohmke; Thomas Coen; Darrell English; Monica Gary.

Also in attendance were Frederick J. Presley, County Administrator; Rysheda McClendon, County Attorney; Julia Homes, Assistant Deputy Clerk; various staff members; and other interested parties.

1. SUPERINTENDENT CIP REVIEW

Dr. Thomas Taylor thanked the Board and said that Assistant Superintendent Chris Fulmer was also present, and he had a little more history with some of the projects and ideas. Dr. Taylor said that everything in his review they had seen before, but it tackled some of the critical issues they have been discussing. He stated that the first is the School Board-adopted CIP and the corresponding County adoption alongside of it, and he asked the School Board to look at the CIP after he came on board as the new Superintendent over the winter because he saw some opportunities for cost-savings that both entities could capitalize on.

Dr. Taylor said that he would review the revised prioritization that the Board had looked at, which was not exactly what he proposed to the School Board, as they had made some adjustments to it. He stated that there were still more discussions to have with the School Board about their priorities because there are some items that align with the scope of their project priorities, but not necessarily in terms of land availability or cost-savings measures. He said they have reached a point where they know a High School #6 is on the list of needs for both the schools and the County, but there is some reshuffling and removal of other projects that the School Board undertook in reevaluating some of their needs.

Dr. Taylor stated that the Board and School Board had contemplated a High School #7 and Middle School #9, and he felt that both of those could fall off of the 10-year time horizon. He said that this creates a $200+ million savings to the County within that timeframe, but there are some other projects that do need some attention. He said that there is a Drew Middle School replacement need, with a fairly substantial number of renovations needed to the current school—about $38 million in potential corrections, maintenance, and renovations that could be saved. He noted that they could also increase capacity by just doing a rebuild versus having to do a potentially costly renovation. He stated that a new way of thinking about this was how much the seats cost, both initially and over the lifetime of the building, so there needs to be consideration of the seat cost over a building lifespan of 60–70 years.

Dr. Taylor stated that a Drew Middle School rebuild achieves a pretty good seat cost per year, especially since you can increase the number of seats that you have. He said the school currently has a capacity of about 650 students, and if they built that school to the size of a normal middle school at 1,100 students, you would increase the capacity by 450 students and save the $38 million for renovation to bring the school up to par and alleviate the need for a Middle School #9—saving an additional $80 million. He said that was a pretty good project because it pushes that school outside of the 10-year horizon, saves a lot of major renovation costs, and adds seat capacity on a large scale at a good price.

Dr. Taylor said that looking at elementary school needs, there are some maps provided for the Board; he noted that these were created prior to redistricting, and while there is some capacity for redistricting in some areas of the County, that is not true throughout the County. He said that there are some pressure points, including in the southwest part of the County in the I-95 corridor; in the central part of the County in the Park Ridge, Embrey Mill, Garrisonville area; and east of I-95 where Stafford Elementary is. He stated that these would grow over time, and how they respond to that may be another strategy to consider: bundling elementary school projects.

Dr. Taylor stated that there is a way to adopt a prototype design where you are only paying once for a design cost that is not as elaborate as previous designs and replicating it using the same construction company. He added that they would save enough money to knock some of the smaller projects off of the list with the on-time and under-budget savings and would benefit from an experience curve so change orders go down substantially. He said if they have used a design that's been used in other jurisdictions, there are additional cost savings.

Dr. Taylor stated that the Hartwood rebuild is similar to the Drew rebuild in that you can capitalize off of a significant number of elementary seats a lot sooner than some of the other projects and get them at a much cheaper cost. He said that looking at the cost per seat over the lifespan of a building, it is a great project in a particular area where the maintenance costs are exorbitant. He stated that at over $20 million worth of major maintenance expense, spending $54 million on a rebuild was a net difference of about $30 million (with some of that being opportunity cost), and what you are getting for that is a right-sized elementary school for 950 students instead of the one they have at 550.

Dr. Taylor reported that the schools have several other much smaller projects that don't give a seat count but still have a benefit to the school division, with some advocacy behind those projects being add-ons with savings and not needing to be financed separately. He stated that they wait until they have savings from some of those projects and complete other projects using that savings. Dr. Taylor said that the schools are highly supportive of the Mary Washington site in the Hartwood District, which has a current program in the facility but could be used for a host of other things. He stated that there were some partnership opportunities with the Commonwealth and with some other organizations where there is money on the table for choice schools. He said they were excited about raising the projects that need attention first to a higher level of priority so they can focus on addressing those needs and are able to exchange that for other large projects that won't be in the 10-year time horizon that can fall off the CIP and not be addressed immediately; those things come at a price tag of over $250 million, which is significant to the County over time.

Dr. Taylor stated that this was an assessment of their current position, but they still had a lot of work to do before the School Board adopts a revised CIP this fall and then sends it to the County. He said that this new thinking that has more of a cost-savings mindset is exciting, and the schools appreciate the opportunity to bring this forward.

Mr. English asked where the Hartwood Elementary school replacement would go.

Dr. Taylor responded that the boards have some work to do in that regard in terms of acquiring land, and there is some discussion that could be had about possibly adjusting some of the priorities to capitalize on existing land. He stated that the Rising Star facility is currently not housing very many students and requires a low student-to-teacher ratio—but the property is large enough to house a middle school, so one could be relocated onto that site. He said that for the Hartwood rebuild, they likely would have to find a parcel of land; the water and sewer continues to be an issue in terms of practical capacity, with about 700 at Hartwood (600 children, 100 staff members) nearing capacity for water and sewer needs. He noted that a lot of that is tied to the fact they are on well and septic, and it is a growing community.

Mr. English asked if some of the High School #6 expenses could be cut if they used the Mary Washington facility.

Dr. Taylor explained that a lot of this would come down to how many seats are desired, and to have a high school with 2,200 students at $164 million would be a very good price in the marketplace per seat, especially over the lifespan of the building. He said if you reduced the cost tied to High School #6, you would be reducing the seat count, the question is where you want to spend your money and what the right mix is. He stated that whether you spend it on High School #6 or the Mary Washington property, you're still addressing seat acquisition—and one of the issues with the Mary Washington property is the high per-seat cost versus the low per-seat coast of High School #6. He said that a good way to approach this is how much it costs per seat over the lifespan of the facility.

Mr. English asked if they had looked at Hartwood Elementary and a middle school being side by side, as it seemed to make sense to build them both at the same time.

Dr. Taylor responded that three were a lot of options to consider, and the Garrisonville-A.G. Wright combination is problematic in transportation because Rock Hill, A.G. Wright, and Garrisonville all share one road: Furnace. He said that they may not need a middle school to be built in that geographic area, and he would probably recommend saving that money and applying it to another project. He noted that there are some cost savings depending on how they go about doing that, but there is also some thinking as to how shared facilities should be used—such as field space, road infrastructure, the student traffic going in and out, etc. He added that he admires the leadership of Garrisonville at A.G. Wright because they were able to make it work, but there were a lot of suboptimal components to having that campus.

Mr. English said that building the high school at Hartwood Elementary and the middle school together, that might resolve it.

Dr. Taylor stated that you could do that, but you probably don't need the middle school in that area.

Ms. Vanuch noted that there was a need identified for 2034, with a location to be determined. She stated that there was a closed session on the high school site and the elementary, so it was not large enough for both an elementary and middle school.

Ms. Allen said they had talked at the last work session about using land from development projects, but some of those sites were not viable—especially Embrey Mill—and she would like to hear input from Dr. Taylor and Mr. Fulmer for that location, given the land quality and the space.

Mr. Fulmer stated that there are some potential site plans that show the Embrey Mill proffered sites—one for elementary school and one for middle school—and personnel on the school facility side have been looking at those two sites and doing some preliminary assessments, then continuing those. He said that no piece of land was going to be perfect, but with the preliminary assessments, they feel they can make both sites work: one for an elementary school and one for a middle school. He noted that they were still early on in the process to work out what all the drawbacks were.

Ms. Allen asked if this would be using the new design model that Dr. Taylor was referencing.

Mr. Fulmer said they would have to come up with a design for that specific site, but they are not there yet.

Ms. Allen asked if it was worthwhile to make it site specific if they aren't going to be saving money on the back end.

Dr. Taylor responded that with an elementary site in particular, you could definitely use a prototype design, and that would be fine.

Mr. Coen expressed concern that with High School #6, the cost they had anticipated was clearly not going to be applicable—however, there has been a predilection to continue to estimate that project at a dollar amount that was significantly higher than what the Board had set at $120 million. He stated that there has not been a predilection this year that they have seen to go with the higher $160 million cost, and the schools have used that as a starting point and then said they would have to "cut down" if they didn't get the full amount. He said that it didn't help with the rapport.

Mr. Coen stated that with North Stafford, he is not sure why they don't look at some seat capacity as well as the program enhancement since that school is overcrowded.

Dr. Taylor stated that there is still a lot of work to be done with the North Stafford Fine Arts Wing renovation, and that school needs that kind of support and facility—but there could possibly be another look at how that facility could also accommodate some of the other changes to push a potential HS#7 further down. He said that as they start to explore some of their instructional programs and look at workplace learning opportunities, their reliance on high school seats might change a little bit, which was a positive. He said that some of their students could be exploring some of the educational programming out in the community and not in the traditional classroom, which was a direction they needed to go.

Ms. Yeung thanked Dr. Taylor for being there and said she agreed with most everything he has said, but the Fine Arts Wing renovation date seems to keep moving, and she thought it was earlier than 2030—as those students would be graduated and having their own families by then. She said that just like the turf fields, they need to remember that these children are in the schools now and she would like to see if this could happen within four years.

Dr. Taylor responded that the School Board's adopted CIP has that as a project for FY30, and he suggests that it be moved up. He said that this along with the fleet services opportunity, which is a great collaboration opportunity, the Fine Arts Wing renovation could be a flexible project that is financed through cost savings from another project to close that gap. He said they could put it on paper for FY28, but it could be concluded in FY25 or FY26 if other projects were delivered on time and under budget.

Ms. Yeung thanked him and emphasized that "fine arts" is not extra in this case and is needed for these children to graduate.

Dr. Taylor confirmed this.

Ms. Bohmke stated that she finds the terms "on time" and "under budget" to be compelling, as she had not heard them in Stafford County before. She said that she would like more information on the Fine Arts Wing renovation, what they have now, and how this is impacting learning. She stated that she likes the idea of moving Drew Middle School and possibly putting it over at the Melchers complex site where there aren't many students, as there was a huge football field there.

Mr. Fulmer confirmed that the site is 30 acres.

Ms. Gary commented that she was also very excited about the Fine Arts Wing, as fine arts help improve test scores and enrich minds.

Dr. Taylor mentioned that this weekend is the 46th Annual Fine Arts Festival in Stafford County Public Schools, to be held at Brooke Point High School from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday—with performance and visual arts.

Ms. Gary noted that her children had participated over the years, and her daughter would be in this one, adding that the event is fantastic.

Ms. Bohmke said she would like information about what the wing is lacking that other schools may have.

Mr. Coen commented that it would be nice if one School Board member in 20 years would show up for Student Government Day on April 6.

Ms. Allen asked what their determining factors would be in deciding to bundle projects, so they would know the fiscal impacts.

Dr. Taylor stated that this is definitely a cost-savings strategy, explaining that the School Board's revised prioritization showed a 3A, 3B, 3C, and 3D—and all of them have an elementary project tagged to them because you can use the same design shell, which can save significant site planning, architecture, and engineering costs. He added that the real savings comes with the experience curve when your contractor builds a similar building multiple times in a row, and they will save on the number of change orders they have over time. He said a good target would be less than 1% change orders, with minor change orders such as plumbing fixtures not being repeated and thus saving money.

Ms. Allen commented that this would help projects start and finish faster, along with the ability to buy in bulk.

Mr. English asked if the fleet services project was something that could be done fairly quickly since it was a small and comparatively low-cost project.

Dr. Taylor stated that similar to the Fine Arts Wing renovation, this could be a filler project with lots of different solution sets—such as an addition or renovation to the existing facility or a rebuild in another place. He said you could capitalize on the cost savings from a much larger project versus trying to finance it independently, taking out debt service for a smaller project versus coupling it with a larger project. He emphasized that it's not deprioritizing it; it's trying to fit it like a puzzle piece into where it can be done for the least amount of money.

Ms. Allen said that she does not see the land acquisition parts of this, as land is getting more expensive, and she would like to have the schools include that in the CIP and even bank land for future projects.

Dr. Taylor said they should explore that on several different horizons, and they should probably consider a 10-year outlook and one looking beyond that so that when land becomes available at an attractive price, they can start building up a bank or looking at what that might look like. He stated that they know there will eventually be a HS#7, and they are now creating capacity that pushes that out and saves a bit more money when it exists later.

Mr. Presley stated that Ms. Light had mentioned this before, and they have set this up as a proposal to develop a fund for a land bank—for the entire CIP, including the school projects—so they can start looking at those opportunities now and aren't scrambling at the last minute.

Ms. Yeung said that she wanted to ensure that the County was working together with the schools to ensure they are going down the right path with this so the sites are appropriate.

Ms. Bohmke stated that there are developments in the community that reference schools such as "Embrey Mill Middle School coming online" and at some point in time, the County needs to tell the development community whether those schools are going forward or not.

2. GENERAL FUND BUDGET REVIEW

Ms. Light stated that staff has asked the Board to advertise the personal property tax rate at $5.49, which assumed a 20% in vehicle assessment. She said the Commissioner of Revenue has been going through and doing assessments, and it's looking more like 30%. She said they assumed an increase in the budget of $3.6 million based on the increase of 20%, and bringing the tax rate down from $6.10 to $5.49. She stated that maintaining $5.49 would provide an additional $8 million above the proposed budget; $4.77 for that tax rate would fund that budget. She said that from a $6.10 to a $4.77, the average taxpayer would go up $24.01 a year in their personal property tax bill.

Ms. Bohmke asked what the average vehicle value was.

Ms. Light responded that it was $19,374.

Mr. Coen asked if the theory is that $5.49 would garner too much money than anticipated, and the thought is to go down to $4.77.

Ms. Light confirmed this and said they are currently at $6.10 for CY2021; it was proposed and advertised at $5.49; at $4.77, it is neutral with the proposed budget.

Mr. Coen asked if it went up at $4.77, and Ms. Light confirmed that it was the $24.01 yearly.

Ms. Yeung asked if it helped fund other things if they went up with it.

Ms. Light responded that every penny change on the personal property tax rate equates to about $112,000, and those can be adjusted in their discussions.

Mr. Presley pointed out that all of that goes to transportation, which is why staff did that, and the cost for construction projects has escalated significantly over the last few years.

Ms. Yeung noted that it requires project managers to get those done, which are hard to find currently because everyone is looking for them.

Ms. Light presented some state budget updates, noting that the grocery tax appears to be held harmless in the short term, with no impacts expected in FY23; transportation has 0.5% of the grocery sales tax they are going to fill with ARPA, and they are considering a one-year freeze on gas tax for FY23—but that is a statewide gas tax and wouldn't impact the PRTC funds. She said that the House currently has a proposed 4% increase in teacher pay with a 1% bonus; the Senate retains the 5% salary increase and uses ARPA funds for an additional $1,000 bonus.

Ms. Bohmke asked if there were anything in transportation that would affect revenue-sharing or FAMPO projects.

Ms. Light responded that they would be backfilling that with ARPA funds, so it should be neutral. She said they've seen changes for state transportation funding in every budget year.

Ms. Light reported that the teacher pay 1% bonus would be approximately $1.4 million to the locality, because this is only for SOQ-funded positions. She said that for Comp Board-funded positions (Commissioner of Revenue, Treasurer, Sheriff, Commonwealth Attorney, and Clerk of the Circuit Court) were looking at a 4% raise and 1% bonus in each year from the House, and a 5% raise and $1,000 bonus from the Senate. She emphasized that these create costs for the locality, and the concerns with teacher pay and compensation is that they would not have the answer before the Board sets the tax rate and adopts the budget; they will have to make adjustments in May if this happens.

Mr. Coen asked if she had been in communication with the school side, because there are a lot of positions that don't fall under SOQ that they typically pay for, and he wondered if they had anticipated paying for those.

Ms. Light responded that the schools are anticipating about $2.4 million for the other employees. She noted that there is no bonus as part of the County's budget.

Ms. Vanuch stated that they are also doing the teacher compression pay scale—and some people were going to get a 20% raise, with some getting the 4%+1% if that's what the state does. She said they would have to figure that out after the budget adoption, noting that usually she would have an issue with this not being equitable, but this year they are getting a lot.

Ms. Light commented that both the House and the Senate are establishing school construction grant fund, and staff would continue to follow up with that to see if that provides any relief for these CIP projects.

Ms. Light stated that regarding the health insurance holidays, if that is put in place with adoption of the budget, they have open enrollment in May; the concern is that employees may take a health plan that would be a higher cost to the County, rather than what they need for their family.

Ms. Vanuch asked why they wouldn't just set the amount for the plan they were enrolled in this year, as they would know the cost going in; next year, they could change it, but the County would only provide the current year's plan.

Mr. Presley said that Shannon Wagner had suggested that instead of giving them the holiday next year, they could be paid for what they paid last year—that way it was clear at that amount, and it could be paid lump sum or over the course of each month's pay.

Ms. Vanuch commented that she liked that approach, as it helped the County know what the cost is and precluded people from jumping to a higher plan just to get this.

Ms. Light stated that the health insurance holiday can be adopted after the budget, so it doesn't necessarily have to be aligned with that and could be brought back in June.

Ms. Vanuch asked if it would be effective July 1.

Ms. Light confirmed that it could be.

Ms. Vanuch said they could decide this in June in terms of what they enrolled in and what the cost would be; if they find the amount is different, they could decide how to proceed. She noted that this was paid out of OPEB savings.

Ms. Light reported that at $5.49, personal property tax yields an additional $8 million; at $4.77, there is no change to their proposed budget.

Ms. Bohmke asked why they couldn't go a bit lower than that, since people were hit pretty hard this year—especially since it's something that has to be paid out of pocket and can't be escrowed. She said that she had been to a meeting with Ms. Allen where a Federal Reserve representative stated that there would likely be six or seven more rate increases this year, with 25 basis points or so with each one; the market would still remain strong, and people would still be ordering cars sight unseen.

Ms. Vanuch pointed out that lowering personal property even lower would necessitate new calculations and cuts to transportation projects in the budget.

Mr. Mayausky stated that the equalized personal property rate was about $4.48.

Ms. Vanuch asked what they wanted to cut from the budget.

Ms. Light stated that the transportation budget was proposed last year at about $4.5 million, and every year, that incrementally increases by 3%, so that's about $200K that transportation is increasing this year. She said that all of that personal property or increase does not necessarily go to transportation—it does support all other departments within the General Fund.

Ms. Vanuch asked where they wanted to cut the $200K to equalize the personal property rate.

Mr. English asked what the total increase was.

Ms. Light responded that it's $3.6 million, so the FY23 budget is a $630K increase for personal property; at $4.77, it provides that increase. She said if the Board wants to cut any or all of that, they will have to go through the budgeted items as shown.

Ms. Vanuch said that if they equalize the rate, they will have to cut $3.6 million from the budget in general, or on transportation.

Ms. Bohmke mentioned that there is record inflation at a 40-year high.

Ms. Vanuch said that she agreed that personal property was way too high, which is what she said last year—but if they want to have this conversation, they have to cut $3.6 million.

Ms. Bohmke suggested that they put it back to $4.77 and move on for the time being.

Ms. Vanuch suggested that they start with pay raises.

Ms. Light reported that they have some pay increases in this budget; membership in the Coalition of High-Growth Communities at $4,000; a raise for the registrar to get her at 10% above Comp Board, which would be $14K; an increase in audit costs due to a change in the auditor, as mentioned previously by the CFO; and increases in electric costs for the General Fund pursuant to a 22% increase, as well as the schools, which equates to about $700K. She said they previously had general obligation bond savings from refunding, but due to increased interested rates, the have taken out that savings. She said they have already discussed the health insurance holiday, but that is one-time revenue so it doesn't really create savings in the ongoing tax revenue.

Ms. Yeung said that she had wanted to see the salary increases for positions that have not been filled for the last several years and taking that off to see how that would balance out.

Ms. Light stated that staff has provided in the Board packets a second page that has a list of all of those positions, attached to the Board's agenda.

Ms. Allen asked Mr. Cannon to explain why people are declining offers in IT, and they need additional personnel as they grow—so she wondered why they were struggling to hire people.

Mr. Cannon responded that the job market was really tight right now, including in the IT market, with demand far exceeding supply. He said that their most recent offers were declined because they didn't pay enough, but they are now working to reclassify some positions.

Ms. Allen asked how far apart they were from private sector offerings.

Mr. Cannon said that it was actually another locality, a school system, that was offering $10,000-$15,000 more.

Ms. Vanuch commented that it didn't seem there was much they could do with the top adjustments, and she suggested dropping the Comp Board pay raises down to 5%. She said that in some of her conversations with Board members, they wanted to start with ones they were committed to, such as the Sheriff's Office and Commonwealth Attorney positions associated with the body cameras. She said those increases were somewhat non-negotiable.

Ms. Yeung stated that there are positions that have been empty for several years.

Ms. Gary noted that one from 2019 was the oldest, and nothing else was that old.

Mr. Coen said that everything else was 2021 or 2022.

Ms. Vanuch said they should next look at positions that the County doesn't pay for.

Ms. Light clarified that Social Services was 84.5% funded by state and federal funds; an ERP Systems Accountant and ERP Systems Analyst are recommended to be funded 75% through ARPA.

Mr. English asked what ERP Systems was.

Ms. Light responded that it is a new financial system.

Ms. Vanuch stated that per Ms. Gary's interest, they should put the Preservation Planner on here.

Ms. Bohmke commented that the County has needed that for about 50 years.

Ms. Allen said that she would like to see at least the Network Engineer get funded for IT.

Ms. Vanuch asked if it was more important to pay the other position at the level it should be or hiring a new position.

Ms. Allen said Mike Cannon could answer that question.

Mr. Cannon stated that the positions are greatly needed, and Stafford is at 40% less than Spotsylvania in IT staffing levels—so they are really struggling.

Ms. Vanuch asked if they wanted to do the Preservation Planner in July or mid-year.

Ms. Bohmke suggested mid-year, because by the time they figure out qualifications, do interviewing, etc., it will be the beginning of next year.

The Board clarified that the position title is Cultural Resource Specialist.

Mr. Mayausky stated that over the past few years, they've been adding collection specialists on the Treasurer's side, and that is creating a tremendous amount of work in his office; everything they collect, his office must create and defend the assessment. He said that it was in support of the collection efforts, which is all being done with existing staff—but it's getting to the point where it's impacting the ability to build the current tax base.

Ms. Bohmke mentioned a constituent who had contacted her last week and said that Spotsylvania's tax relief for the elderly was for those making less than $50K, and this individual recommended increasing the net income level.

Mr. Mayausky said that each county gets to set its own parameters, and they are different in Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg than they are in Stafford, and he could put together a comparison chart. He noted that they may have a broader program and let more people in, but they have a lower cap. He said that Stafford's cap is $3,000; one locality is as low as $1,500. He said the philosophy in Stafford has been to identify who needs the help the most and give them the most help as they can; other localities have a philosophy of wanting to cast as wide a net as they can and give everyone a little bit of help.

Ms. Bohmke asked what the income level is.

Mr. Mayausky responded that they have a two-tiered program, and they have 100% relief at one tier and another tier at 50% relief.

Ms. Yeung asked if this were just local and not state, and she wondered if others could be added who are simply low-income.

Mr. Mayausky said that because Virginia is a Dillon Rule state, unless the state provides authority, they can't do it. He said that they have the veteran's relief, and the elderly and disabled relief is a local option—but once you exercise the option, you must follow the state's parameters. He said that means they have to either be over 65 or totally and permanently disabled, with the County setting the income and net worth requirements.

Ms. Allen asked about funding the public safety positions.

Ms. Vanuch said that she has had conversations that have revealed some consternation about funding the battalion chief position.

Ms. Bohmke said they need to have more information about some of these positions.

Ms. Vanuch suggested that they highlight the ones they want to fund and request additional information for those positions so they better understand those details.

Ms. Bohmke said that she had spoken with Chief Newhart earlier today about the MARCUS Alert, and he told her that when he came into work today, he had four deputies at the hospital.

Ms. Vanuch stated that this is why she supports funding the field operations, because those are the deputy positions.

Ms. Bohmke asked Mr. English if a Deputy Sheriff-Field Ops was someone out on the street or in the office.

Mr. English responded that it was someone on the street.

Ms. Bohmke asked him if Communications Officer was someone in dispatch.

He confirmed that it was.

Ms. Bohmke asked about the Field Ops-Sergeant.

Mr. English said that was a street position as well.

Ms. Vanuch noted that those positions are all required for the body cameras.

Ms. Bohmke asked Chief Cardello to explain the positions, beginning with the Battalion Chief.

Chief Cardello responded that in the last four years, they have increased field staff by more than 30% but have not increased supervision of that staff; adding more positions this year would just mean more people on the street that don't have the proper supervision. He said they currently have one battalion chief supervising 12 stations, which was not optimal for a lot of reasons: efficiency, safety, etc. He said that those chiefs may be in White Oak one minute and Rock Hill the next, so the idea of adding another supervisor was to split the County into north and south, with the battalion chiefs handling calls in each.

Ms. Bohmke pointed out that it's actually three positions because of the shift rotation, and she asked how it put the County at risk if they only had one person.

Chief Cardello explained that they have one person for the whole County, handling all the things that have to get done on a daily basis, including all the fire stations—people coming to work on time, training activities, and the emergency calls themselves. He said that it puts them at risk because their supervision profile is one person for about 50 people on duty out of 12 stations, so it's one person riding 277 square miles, and that's not a good model.

Ms. Vanuch said that her understanding is that it is only critical if they have two major incidents at one time, such as a house fire where the battalion chief arrives and calls the shots; if they are tied up at another incident, then it's the captain or EMS supervisor who would then be in charge, or one of the assistant fire chiefs dispatched to manage the critical incident.

Chief Cardello said that was just the emergency aspect of it — which is less than 10% of the time that person actually spends. He emphasized that they are responsible for ensuring that personnel are doing the right things, are properly trained, and that there is adequate coverage such as when there is an ALS emergency on one end of the County, answering sick callouts, and filling holes with the right people. He said that it is largely an administrative role, but they are also responsible for emergency response that includes both fire and EMS, and having just one person means the system is not as efficient as it could or should be.

Ms. Allen asked how long it would take to fill these positions.

Chief Cardello responded that it is a mid-year request and they've started early enough. He said there were some internal candidates that would be good, and he thinks there would be a fair amount of interest because it's a higher-level position.

Ms. Allen asked what would happen if it were filled internally, as it would have a trickle-down effect.

Chief Cardello said that others would move up into any vacated spots, noting that there are 17 lieutenants, 10 or 11 captains, and 3 battalion chiefs—and there is very little upward mobility.

Ms. Yeung asked for a separated column as to the number of individuals being hired.

Ms. Gary asked Chief Cardello to discuss the other administrative positions.

Chief Cardello responded that there is someone who is a former volunteer from Hartwood who comes in twice per week and helps with logistics tracking on a voluntary basis. He said there is also a woman from the Brooke Volunteer Fire Department who comes in once or twice a week and helps with fit testing, logistics, and tracking. He added that there is also the essential fixture, "Miss Charlotte," who is there three or four days a week for several hours a day.

Ms. Gary asked if there would be any administrative overlap with the new battalion chief.

Chief Cardello explained that there would not really be any, as what people like Miss Charlotte do is more true administration. He said that the battalion chiefs don't affect other administrative positions, as they are dealing with field operations administration.

Ms. Allen asked if the hiring of three individuals as mentioned in the background information was the three positions shown for this budget.

Ms. Vanuch clarified that those were not the same positions, and there was a dispatch role that experiences incredibly high turnover—so they are asking for three additional positions to try to alleviate some of the manpower issues, as it had been hard to fill these.

Ms. Allen said she would like to hear from the Sheriff's Office as to priorities, as they already have three already going through the process, Fire and Rescue has their needs as explained, and they may have to make some tough decisions for the growing needs of the County.

Mr. English said that it takes six months to a year to train a Communications Officer for ECC, so they want to get them on board now.

Ms. Bohmke asked about the transport staffing, firefighter, EMT positions.

Chief Cardello responded that that's six positions—two per shift.

Ms. Bohmke asked where those would be located.

Chief Cardello replied that there would be one on the north end and one on the south end—probably Garrisonville and Berea, or Aquia and Brea—as the need is in the north 610 corridors. He confirmed that it would be six per unit, and they are asking for two units, for a total of 12.

Ms. Vanuch asked if those were separated firefighter/EMT.

Ms. Bohmke reiterated Ms. Yeung's request for a column showing the actual number of people.

Ms. Vanuch suggested that they add in the Deputy Sheriff and Communications Officer, then highlight the three Fire and Rescue positions differently to note that more information is needed.

Ms. Gary said she would also like to hear more about the Personal Property Specialist.

Ms. Bohmke said she is not in favor of the Animal Caretaker II.

Mr. English asked if there was any way to up the fees to help pay for the Planner, Administrative Specialist, and Code Enforcement Officer positions in Planning and Zoning.

Ms. Vanuch said that was part of the survey they were doing, which was why she didn't think they should hire these yet, as that would cut some of the steps in Planning and Zoning and make it easier for people to move through the process.

Ms. Allen asked Mr. Harvey if he still needed the staffing if they did the survey.

Ms. Vanuch said part of the survey is to determine that.

Ms. Light clarified that there is only one position for Planning and Zoning, as the others are already established.

Mr. Harvey said that his department and Development Services have worked to get a consultant on board who would be doing a process study to find efficiencies in the department, looking at manpower and comparing them to other jurisdictions, as well as looking at a fee schedule adjustment. He stated that it would probably be good timing for next fiscal year's budget to get the outcome of the study and where it would take them.

Ms. Bohmke asked when the study results were going to be ready, as she recalled a timeframe of last fall.

Ms. Vanuch said the only position they are talking about funding is the Preservation Planner, so she wasn't sure why they were discussing this.

Referencing the Animal Caretaker II position, Ms. Yeung said that she sat down with Ms. Light to review every single position, and every single department put these on here because they needed them—so they shouldn't just arbitrarily reject them.

Ms. Bohmke stated that she went to the animal shelter, and there were three people working there—two of them were on their cellphones, and couldn't even escort her down to see the dogs. She said that in a customer service business, they didn't know who she was, and she brought dog food in and other things and wasn't treated very well.

Mr. Coen said that if they are taking last year's budget and bringing it forward, those three positions are moved forward into this year's budget, yet it seems they're not going to fill them for another year.

Ms. Vanuch clarified that there are not any additional positions stemming from the study except for the one she mentioned.

Ms. Allen asked [off mic].

Mr. Morris responded that they did a study of physical properties: how they are secured, how they keep them secured, how they train staff on emergency procedures to get in and out of buildings. He said that this relates to recent security incidents at public buildings.

Ms. Light said that the study was very complex and thorough and addressed how they secure all of their campuses in about 130 pages.

Mr. Morris noted that this was the highest-ranking position when the committee had ranked them as well.

Ms. Vanuch asked staff to have that follow-up for next time, as it will be helpful in the Board's decision-making as to which positions to fill.

Ms. Light said that those positions were reflected in the spreadsheet as shown. She removed the Animal Caretaker II position.

Ms. Yeung commented that some of the deputy positions were not due yet.

Ms. Vanuch explained that the positions need to be hired so they can set up the infrastructure and training to implement the body cameras. She said the longer they push out hiring those positions, the longer they have to push out implementing the body cameras.

Ms. Yeung said that she thought the application was not ready yet.

Ms. Vanuch stated that the former Board already did the work and signed the contract, and the CAD implementation was a totally separate thing. She emphasized that those positions are required to set up all of the body camera infrastructure—as there is nobody there to set up the infrastructure and policies. She said when they met with fellow police departments that implemented body cameras, they had to hire out the critical team a year out. She suggested that Ms. Yeung go back and watch the December 14, 2021 Board meeting where Captain Stout talked through all of that and they voted on the contract.

Ms. Bohmke asked Ms. Light to go back to the other positions on the spreadsheet.

Ms. Light explained that there is a Legal Assistant and an Assistant Commonwealth Attorney midyear, and a Paralegal starting on July 1. She said with the Sheriff's Department, it was a Field Operations Specialist, a Records Specialist at midyear, and an Administrative Specialist starting July 1. She said they have worked with the Commonwealth Attorney, Sheriff's Department, and County Administration, who have looked at this collectively to try to minimize the impact on the FY23 budget.

Mr. Morris noted that the Dispatcher is not connected to the body cameras, and the CAD system needs that regardless.

Ms. Vanuch stated that the ones they are hoping to change to will be implemented under evidence.com so they can just select the call, upload it to the camera, and it will process all the video evidence at the Commonwealth Attorney's Office—such as use of deadly force or an arrest made—which makes it much easier. She said they can still do it without that, but the officer has to select it manually on the current CAD on evidence.com.

Ms. Yeung said that she thought the five-year plan for CAD due in 2024 FY24 had one employee for 75.

Ms. Vanuch stated that there was not a new employee; the CAD was just the computer system.

Mr. English noted that CAD would come in and provide the training on the system.

Ms. Light said that Ms. Yeung was referring to the requirement that the Commonwealth Attorney must have one position for every 75 body cameras issued, so this is over the code minimum, which is often the case with SOQ or Comp Board funded.

Ms. Vanuch said they are keeping it under the 150 so that the code stays under two positions.

Ms. Allen asked about the status of the Assistant IT Director.

Mr. Cannon stated that it was just him running IT, and the workload itself was getting to the point where he needs someone to focus on day-to-day operations.

Ms. Light noted that they had lost that position during the recession, and it was never really filled again.

Ms. Allen asked him to characterize how much the workload had increased, particularly during the pandemic.

Mr. Cannon said that just looking at things in the work plan, like the new CAD system, involves them a lot; the new ERP involves them, going to Office 365, etc. all have an impact.

Ms. Allen stated that they need to make sure that IT has structure so it can do all the things they are asking the County to do moving forward.

Ms. Vanuch said that as Ms. Bohmke had mentioned, they need more information and background on these requests and the rationale—and if Board members have questions, they need to work with staff and have answers before the next meeting, so they are coming in knowing which positions are important to them. She mentioned that Ms. Gary was very adamant about and had done her research on one of the positions she knew she wanted, and she asked Board members to do that so they weren't having to go backwards and discuss every single role. She emphasized that they need to focus on how to get to the tax rate they want.

Ms. Bohmke said that Ms. Giles and Ms. Holmes will send a link to the Board docs, but when you pull it up, there's nothing there.

Ms. Light clarified that all of the positions are in open.gov, and she could send a link to the Board with all the positions and justifications; this includes metrics from each department, as well as a list of requested positions that were unfunded in this budget.

Ms. Bohmke acknowledged that staff had already sent that to the Board, and she had forgotten about open.gov.

Ms. Vanuch asked her colleagues that they make the phone calls and inquiries ahead of time, so they had what they needed to make the decision.

Staff also indicated that there were items presented at the Board retreat for their consideration.

Ms. Light stated that staff could put this in order of strategic priorities, as going through 85 lines of a spreadsheet may be difficult to do in this type of format.

Ms. Vanuch noted that these things were all additions to this year's budget, and she reiterated to her colleagues that they get through the list of prioritizations and contemplate what is necessary now and what may not be this particular year.

Ms. Bohmke asked if this also included what was in the strategic plan and whether it met those priorities.

Ms. Light said that staff can add that as a column so they can see how those align with priorities.

In summary, Ms. Light stated that the budget was still out of balance by about $22 million at a rate of 78 cents.

Ms. Vanuch asked what it would do if they raised it to 83 cents.

Ms. Light confirmed that it would be about $12 million.

Ms. Bohmke said that 86 cents would go down to about $8 million.

Ms. Vanuch stated that she had heard from the Board the approach of equalizing the tax rate and then looking at the 6.6-cent fire levy, which equates to about $14 million. She said those things together puts them at 84.6 cents.

Ms. Bohmke said that their decision on the fire levy and tax rate is chicken-and-egg, and she'd like to know going in if there were four votes for the fire tax.

Ms. Allen said even with that, they would still be short almost $7 million.

Ms. Vanuch pointed out that they are talking about adding a 6.6-cent tax increase on people in an assessment year, so that's why they need to go through this and decide what they want to take out. She said that even if they do this at a 6.6 tax increase with the fire levy, they are still looking at that $7 million unfunded.

Ms. Allen said she understood that, but the 6.6 cents would only be going to a fire tax versus if they did that countywide so that other departments could figure out how to get funding, versus just giving the fire department funding.

Mr. Coen said the whole fire budget is $28 million, so if they did the 6.6 cents, they're paying $14 million through the levy. He asked if Ms. Light had been able to look at what he had requested earlier in the day.

Ms. Light said that she can make a separate sheet that calculates what the tax rate would need to be.

Ms. Gary commented that if there is something important to a department, she would like for them to come in and discuss it, as the Board can't possibly hit all of that as in-depth as needed.

3. CIP REVIEW

Ms. Light presented a spreadsheet that reflected the changes for any bond funds associated with projects. She said that they added Mountain View Dog Park for $630K, proffers for which are $576K, with one-time fund balance use of $53K; that is a change proposed pursuant to Board request. Ms. Light stated that at an 83-cent rate, that provides a cumulative of $574 million, and as the CIP is presented, they would be out of balance in the last four years, as well as some issues with debt capacity in the final two years.

Board members reviewed the fire station modifications in the CIP model.

Ms. Vanuch said that she would like to see the response time impact of upstaffing Station 2 and Station 14 with an additional engine and EMS unit, and whether they would need another fire station at Embrey Mill. She stated that up until this budget, they had not discussed a new station there, so she wanted to vet this in terms of debt capacity, with bond referendum consideration.

Ms. Light clarified that there would be $29 million of debt capacity at the end of the 10 years.

Ms. Vanuch asked if they could move the elementary school up with that.

Ms. Light said they could move it up to FY25, as it would reduce the cost.

Mr. Coen suggested FY26.

Ms. Gary said that she would like to factor in moving the training facility out and keeping Embrey Mill in, because it is slated for a later development.

Ms. Bohmke noted that there have been discussions about a fire station at Embrey Mill, and they are reaching out to individual Supervisors about it. She said they could also look at 86 cents, and this was just a starting point.

Ms. Vanuch agreed that this was just a starting point of what they could take out and potentially put in a bond referendum, and how it would impact the debt service to be able to move up the schools—because everyone wants to build schools faster, but there is limited debt capacity.

Ms. Yeung asked how much you would still need to put up for bond and what they would still need to put towards it.

Ms. Vanuch said when they did the road bond, they costed it out; so if it were $45 million for fire stations, the bond referendum would ask the public if they supported it, knowing the impact to tax rate. She confirmed that it covers the entire amount through the bond and allows constituents to vote on whether they agree to a tax increase for that specific need—and the pathway to do that would be through the fire levy.

Ms. Yeung asked if she were deciding that now.

Ms. Vanuch responded that she wasn't deciding it but was just explaining that it is an option to move the schools up. She emphasized that they have a lot of infrastructure needs, and at some point, when they need this much expended, the taxpayers need to be able to weigh in. She said that they don't have the option for this type of input on many things, but bonds allow for that—and another alternative would be the schools going to bond referendum. She noted that Rock Hill was cash, and Aquia was already funded.

Ms. Allen stated that her objection to the bond referendum was that even if citizens said "yes," they were still on the hook for it, so they should budget it with the potential of them having to pay for it. She said the fire tax could be used for the same thing, and citizens have the opportunity for impact on that as well and can use the tax to fund the construction; regardless, they were going to pay for it. Ms. Allen asked what the earliest is that this would go on referendum.

Ms. Vanuch confirmed that it could go on this year.

Ms. Allen asked what the earliest was that the stations could be built.

Ms. Bohmke said when they did the road bonds, the genesis was to have something for everyone in the County that they could relate to—a road in everyone's district that was being either reconstructed, repaved, or widened—so there was something that appealed to everyone in the County. She stated that the same thing would have to happen here, and they would need a bond issue that appealed to the entire County, as otherwise it would not be successful.

Ms. Vanuch commented that a bigger part of this was messaging, and with the bond referendum, it was how they would pay for it, how much it would cost, and when it would be done. She said that they can do that through a separate CIP for the fire stations, which the taxpayers would be informed of, with specific response times and improvements. She stated that when you build a station in White Oak, it does impact Rock Hill because they are taking less capacity away from the other side of the County. She said the standards of cover would show the applicability across all of the different districts, so this was a messaging issue.

Ms. Vanuch stated that she felt this would be much better suited going to bond next year when they have all the constitutional officers up for election in a lot of the Supervisor races, as there would be a lot more people that showed up specific to County needs. She noted that it's not like these all need to be built in the next year, and they have time to be able to do this.

Ms. Yeung asked to hear from administration.

Mr. Presley stated that what the Chair is proposing makes sense in a lot of ways because it is asking constituents to weigh in on whether they feel this is important enough to raise their tax rate. He said the County would be able to define the increase in the messaging and define the locations targeted for the new stations. He emphasized that it would be very clear to them what the impact would be, and they could do it either as a fire tax or as part of the regular real estate rate—but either way it would increase the tax rate if they approved it, and that's the only way they would have the debt capacity present to do that. He said that as the Chair said, it freed up room now for other projects and moved things along.

Ms. Yeung asked how clear the messaging was if they just did this with the veterans.

Ms. Vanuch clarified that it was a constitutional amendment that was not messaged at all, so this would actually be similar to what they did with the roads, with messaging as to which roads would be impacted, what projects would be done, and the timeline of the changes.

Ms. Yeung asked if they could mix fire stations and schools.

Mr. Presley responded that it would probably be best to do those as separate referendum questions, but you could do them on the same ballot.

Ms. Vanuch noted that this was a really common way to approach this.

Mr. Presley stated that it was prudent to have this in a year when there are constitutional officers and supervisors running, because if not, the turnout would likely be from those who have an axe to grind or a sole interest in the projects. He said that bond referendums frequently do not do well in off-year election cycles.

Ms. Vanuch said that she sent out mailers running for campaign office on the referendum, so it may be more helpful to do them in a local election.

Ms. Bohmke stated that the other option is what Ms. Allen suggested with the fire tax, and people do have the ability to come and email the Board, speak at their meetings and public hearings on the fire tax, etc. She said that her concern about the fire tax is that while the County's communications staff can message it, it's not the same as people voting at the ballot and saying they want it. She said that if there were four votes for the fire tax, it could happen this year.

Ms. Vanuch said that it couldn't happen this year because it was only advertised at 6.6 cents.

Ms. Bohmke responded that it wasn't sufficient to cover all these needs, but the fire tax can happen at that rate.

Ms. Allen said that her only concern with the bond referendum was that the last one was passed in 2019, and she gets complaints all the time from residents as to roads not being fixed—and she does not want people to have that same angst. She asked how long they would have to wait to get a fire station to meet their needs if other districts were getting them through this. She stated that because of the debt they were undertaking as a Board, they would have to make difficult fiscal decisions.

Ms. Vanuch stated that in her opinion, they are literally implementing what the standards of cover recommended to do and allowing the taxpayers to do that. She said she didn't know when the standards recommending building a station in the Widewater area, but when and if it did say that, it would be built on the CIP if it didn't go on the bond referendum—but that wasn't something Fire & Rescue asked for based on the standards of cover they brought forward to the Board; the other three stations and training facility were recommended. She said they could hash out the timing in the bond referendum if they wanted to move up the training facility sooner than FY28/FY29, they could do that and just outline the cost of building that up. She asked staff to pull the CIP back up and emphasized the importance of addressing it, because moving the schools up as Supervisors have indicated that they wanted to do means that something else needs to come off—unless people want to vote on the largest tax increase Stafford has ever had, and she hasn't heard anyone say they want to do that. Ms. Vanuch stated that there must be some give and take here to get to a resolution in the next few weeks.

Ms. Yeung asked if they were only looking at the CIP right now.

Ms. Vanuch responded that this was just about the CIP and debt service capacity; it has nothing to do with the actual budget. She said if they raise salaries, for example, it has nothing to do with the debt service but pertains to revenue and how it impacts debt service. She stated that if they take items off this list and move things up, such as the elementary school to 2026, there would still be debt service available.

Ms. Yeung noted that Dr. Taylor stated that he did not need the middle school right now, and in her mind, it should be the elementary school over the high school in terms of the redistrict.

Ms. Vanuch clarified that he wants High School #6 moved up to FY25—but there's no way that's possible unless they can find a very fast builder—and it should stay in FY26.

Ms. Light pointed out that the schools' 2025 is local government's 2026, based on how the calendars work.

Ms. Vanuch suggested that they follow Dr. Taylor's list and see the impacts.

The Board went through staff's CIP model and the school items and moved Elementary #18 and Hartwood Elementary replacement to FY26 to see the impact.

Mr. Coen said following the chart for the fire stations, it eliminated $48 million, and just Elementary #18 is $51 million.

Ms. Vanuch said if they were just dealing with the high school and Elementary School #18.

Ms. Allen stated that she was not opposed to putting the schools on a referendum, and the CIP has shown the amount of infrastructure they need to handle the growing County needs; if they are going to put fire stations on a referendum, people also need to know the schools needed—so perhaps they should also be put on a referendum.

Ms. Vanuch said she felt that was a great idea, and Spotsylvania had done one for parks, one for roads, etc.—but she was trying to get through this budget at the moment.

Ms. Allen said they should only look at High School #6 for this budget.

Ms. Vanuch stated that the elementary school is wanted in FY26 and they have an opportunity in the southern part of the County for that.

Ms. Light clarified that the elementary school is now in FY26 and was moved up a year; High School #6 remained unchanged and would still be open in August 2025 (FY26). She demonstrated the debt capacity impact with removing all of the fire stations and pulling up the elementary school, confirming that there was nothing in here for Hartwood.

Ms. Bohmke asked what the total bond issuance would be for all of the outstanding items.

Ms. Light responded that High School #7 would be about $215 million.

Ms. Bohmke said there were also Drew and Hartwood, noting that the bond total for the additional items was going beyond $200 million—and people were not going to approve that.

Ms. Light noted that they would have debt capacity of $574 million, and over the 10 years, there's another $84 million that could be assigned in CIP.

Ms. Vanuch commented that they would likely need to hold another work session, as they were going to be holding a public hearing and voting April 5 on the tax rate and budget—but they did not have to have the entire CIP and referendum details determined at that point.

Ms. Light referenced the spreadsheet presented, with increments of two cents changing on the tax rate, with the capability to take out the line items like school projects.

Ms. Vanuch stated that the Board needed to do some serious sole searching as to what might go on a bond referendum, and they should prepare for both the school and fire bond—and staff could provide analysis as to the impact to the taxpayer for whatever the total might be.

Ms. Bohmke said that $300 million—even if it was issued over 10 or 15 years—was far too much money, and people were not going to support it. She stated that they do have infrastructure needs, but they also must recognize that this is an old community and people have lived here all their lives.

Ms. Vanuch stated that all they are doing at this point is taking the schools' wish list and tallying it, so the public understands the cost of what they are asking for, and the cost of what fire and rescue is asking for, and then the Board can determine what they want to prioritize for the CIP and what the public wants to expedite.

Ms. Bohmke reminded the Board that with the road bond, they didn't even issue all the bonds, and people asked where all that money went—and the IRS has limitations on how many years you have to issue the bonds. She stated that they must have the staff and resources to expend the bond money, and they had $15–20 million left, which people weren't happy about.

Mr. Coen said that there is also the question of how much oversight they would have over the schools if they did a school bond, and how much say the Board would have over things like the order and price points.

ADJOURNMENT

At 6:20 p.m., Chairman Vanuch adjourned March 22, 2022 Stafford County Board of Supervisors Budget work session.

Frederick J. Presley
County Administrator

Crystal L. Vanuch
Chairman