

County layoffs possible

Billy Ball

Nov 07, 2008

MONROE As the national financial crisis hits home, Union County officials can't say if the county government is due for layoffs.

"I honestly can't rule that out," County Manager Al Greene told commissioners Monday. "I can say that if we take measures that drastic, we would certainly want to get that to the commission and the employees as soon as possible."

Greene would not say what departments could be affected and how many jobs are at risk, but some might require at least a temporary layoff.

Officials hope to have a plan for addressing the budget logjam in the next two to three weeks.

The news comes as county officials struggle to take out credit in the still-icy markets.

The Board of Commissioners implemented a hiring and capital spending freeze last month, but Greene said Union County will have to do more to cut costs, including pushing back major construction projects for the overburdened school system.

"We don't want to take a shotgun approach where we say, "Everybody reduce your departmental expenses by 3 percent," Greene said. "Because every situation isn't the same."

Some portions of county government affected by a struggling economy, like the Health Department and the Department of Social Services, will see an increase in demand, he said.

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Board of Commissioners Vice Chairman Kevin Pressley had asked for an update for county employees Monday, as rumors swirled that jobs are in jeopardy.

"We owe it to our employees to give them some type of assurance or some type of direction," Pressley said. "Are we anticipating a layoff or not anticipating a layoff?"

County Finance Director Kai Nelson is working to prioritize county expenditures, Greene said, as well as to restructure county debt to "provide stability."

According to Greene, Union County's debt payments could escalate in the coming months, and revenues might be limited.

Nelson said Union County is facing a "significant challenge" in finding buyers for its short-term debt and working with local banks.

The county had aggressive construction plans for its booming school system, but Nelson has said those might have to be scaled back.

"None of our counties or cities in North Carolina are really bringing issues to market," he said. "Because the market continues to be in crisis."

Pressley said the county needs to find a way to save jobs, including considering cutbacks on hours.

"These folks are just like all of us," he said. "Just trying to provide in some rough times, and I want to make sure that they're able to do their job, but be able to provide for their families."

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