

## County to lay off 40 today

**By Billy Ball**  
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MONROE Cash-strapped Union County will announce a wave of layoffs today, with about 40 employees under the gun, County Manager Al Greene said.

The news comes as county commissioners try to make up a projected \$15 million budget deficit spurred by shrinking revenues in the midst of the American financial crisis. The county's debt burden ballooned at the same time that building inspection fees dropped precipitously; commissioners also expect lower property tax returns than projected.

"This is a terrible day in the annals of Union County," Commissioner Allan Baucom said. "And there's not anybody here that likes what's occurring."

Greene met with county department heads Thursday afternoon to outline the layoffs, which will affect county administrative offices, Union County Public Works, the Register of Deeds and building inspectors, among others.

"It's a comprehensive reduction throughout the organization," he said.

County Finance Officer Kai Nelson told commissioners Thursday that the county can save \$13 million through the widespread job cuts, including 11 proposed layoffs at the Union County Sheriff's Office, and massive budget cuts. The remaining \$2 million would come from the county's fund balance, which acts as a savings account.

Union County Public Schools which receives the lion's share of the county budget is among the departments being asked to pinch pennies. Greene told UCPS Superintendent Ed Davis and Board of Education Chairman Dean Arp Wednesday that the school system needs to shed about \$3.9 million of the \$87 million it receives from the county.

The county's total budget for 2008-2009 was \$237.3 million. The cuts will reduce it to \$222.3 million.

Greene said the county needs to act quickly before the county deficit balloons further.

"What is now a precarious financial situation is going to become a crisis for Union County," he said.

The board agreed, after several hours of debate and often pointed arguments, to meet with Sheriff Eddie Cathey and the Board of Education to brainstorm ways to slash the budget.

No session with Cathey had been planned, but Commissioners Lanny Openshaw and Tracy Kuehler were reluctant to cut 11 jobs from the Sheriff's Office without a thorough talk with Cathey, who said the layoffs could slow emergency response time in the county.

"I'm not just going to rubber stamp this thing," Openshaw said.

But Baucom argued it is "fiscally irresponsible" to delay recommended cost-saving measures.

"In my opinion, we're not doing the job that we're elected to do today and I will not support it," he said.

The board was locked in a 2-2 tie over setting a meeting with Cathey until Commissioner Parker Mills agreed to vote

with Openshaw and Kuehler.

Board Vice Chairwoman Kim Rogers was out of town Thursday and could not cast the tie-breaking vote.

The Sheriff's Office would need to lose about \$1.2 million, including at least \$700,000 in equipment and vehicles, officials say.

Meanwhile, the school system will have to decide where it can absorb the \$3.9 million hit. UCPS has already returned \$2 million to the county after 2008 enrollment projects fell short.

Nelson said UCPS will have "wide latitude" in choosing if the money comes from its daily operating expenses or construction plans.

Openshaw said he wants the Board of Education to be an "equal participant" in the discussion.

"I put the schools and, quite frankly, the Sheriff's (Office) at the top of our charts in terms of our responsibilities," he said. "Safety and education are two of the primary functions I like to support."

Thursday's meeting grew heated at points, peaking when Baucom blasted the board and Openshaw for delaying on personnel cuts at the Sheriff's Office.

The job, he said, was best left to the sheriff and the county manager.

"Our charge is not to take and continuously to micromanage," Baucom said. "... Lanny, I'm sorry you're giving me the sneer. I have the floor at this point."

In turn, Openshaw criticized Baucom, the former board chairman, for his part in the county's financial woes.

"Mr. Baucom, I've sat here for two years and watched you guys rubber stamp basically everything that came down the pike," Openshaw said. "(You) didn't deal with any positive constructive criticism and suggestions."

Commissioners' meeting with Cathey is scheduled for 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Union County Government Center.

Greene said commissioners might meet with the Board of Education on Feb. 5.

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