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Schools Get More; Tax Rate Stays the Same

Final Approval Set for Next Week, After Series of Nearly Rancor-Free Hearings

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Board of Supervisors signed off yesterday on a \$3.3 billion spending plan for the coming budget year that maintains the current tax rate, ending a series of public hearings that officials said was remarkable for its lack of rancor.

"This budget process has been the quietest, least contentious in my 20 years in office," said Supervisor Sharon S. Bulova (D-Braddock), chairman of the board's budget committee.

The supervisors, who will formally adopt the budget Monday, heard from 129 speakers over three nights of hearings this month. By comparison, 637 people came to the microphone during a week of sessions in 1996 -- including a marathon 13 1/2 -hour hearing one Saturday.

Some of that difference is a reflection of more stable economic times. A decade ago, the county was suffering the effects of a recession, sending housing values down and property taxes up. This year, although the average assessed value of a single-family home dropped for the first time since the mid-1990s, to \$542,744 from \$544,541, the tax rate will remain at 89 cents for each \$100 of assessed value.

The spending plan for the year beginning July 1 is essentially the same one proposed by County Executive Anthony H. Griffin in February. The biggest chunk of county spending, \$1.5 billion, will go to education. That represents a 4 percent increase over the current fiscal year; overall revenue is projected to increase by about 2.3 percent. The budget will also pay for about 70 new jobs to operate and maintain county buildings that will be opening soon, including the Public Safety and Transportation Operations Center.

The county will also continue to set aside one cent of the tax rate, or about \$22.7 million, for preservation of affordable housing and improvements in stormwater management.

Throughout this year's hearings, the public's voice was relatively soft-spoken and, in many instances, laudatory, with speakers thanking the supervisors for their support of various programs.

"They seem to be totally in touch with the citizenry," said John N. Jennison, head of the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations. "There was no outrage, no sacking the castle, no pitchforks in the air."

Jennison, who is also an active political supporter of [Board Chairman Gerald E. Connolly](#) (D), accurately described the environment. But there were a number of appeals for help that, if not unheeded, were still unfulfilled.

Despite appearances by a succession of low-income working mothers, often with their small children in tow, the board declined to make up the loss of \$6 million in federal funding for the Child Care Assistance and Referral program. The county currently pays \$29 million for the program, which provides child care for about 4,700 children of mothers who have worked their way off public assistance.

If no further funding is found, 960 child-care slots will be lost. Officials hope to make up for the shortfall through attrition, as children age out of the program. But about 3,000 children remain on waiting lists.

The board said it would revisit the issue later this year, when the county knows how much money it might have left over from the current fiscal year, which ends June 30.

The board also deferred action on a proposal to pay what advocates call a "living wage" to county employees whose salary falls below the poverty level. During budget hearings, the Campaign for a Living Wage presented research indicating that in 2005, more than 1,000 [Fairfax](#) employees may have earned a salary inadequate to meet local living costs.

The board said it would look at the matter later this year.

"We had hoped that this would be a enough of a priority to make it into the current budget, so we're disappointed we didn't get included," said Clayton Sinyai, chairman of the Campaign for a Living Wage. "But we are looking forward to working with the board in the fall."

The supervisors also met yesterday in closed session for at least the third time this year to discuss the Metro extension to [Dulles International Airport](#). The actions of the board, which supports construction of a tunnel for the [Tysons Corner](#) segment of the extension, have been criticized by the Virginia Coalition for Open Government and others.

County Attorney David P. Bobzien has said that the meetings can be closed because board members are receiving legal advice.

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