

Lehigh executive, commissioners ready to rumble over \$405 million budget

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CORRECTION: 10/3/2008 FOR THE RECORD (Published Friday, October 3, 2008) A story in Thursday's paper incorrectly listed Lehigh County Commissioner Sterling Raber's political party. Raber is a Republican. The commission is controlled 5-4 by Republicans.

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A showdown is looming over tonight's Lehigh County budget hearing as the administration and the commissioners spar over potential cuts to the annual spending plan.

The hearing, scheduled for 6 p.m. at the county administration building, promises to be heated: Commissioners have proposed slashing more than \$2 million from the \$405 million plan and County Executive Don Cunningham is calling in support for programs that may be slated for cuts.

In a letter to supporters, Cunningham warns of the potential cuts and asks for support at tonight's meeting.

The letter "is an effort at good and open government," Cunningham said. "Quite honestly, this process is somewhat akin to what happens in the state Legislature in Harrisburg. This is a vote where motions are put on the table and acted on without much in the way of public awareness around them, which is not typical in local government.

Republican commissioners have proposed cuts in several county programs in an effort to narrow the gap between revenue and spending.

Commissioner Dean Browning has proposed cutting several areas, including nonunion employee raises, open space preservation, a study on local rail service, quality of life grants and other programs.

"The 2009 budget calls for us to spend \$12 million more than we generate in tax revenue. The purpose of the adjustments I have proposed is to either slow the growth in spending so we can accrue that benefit over time or to defer spending until we have a better picture of how we will finish out this year and/or until the economy begins to expand again and thereby increasing our revenue base," Browning said.

As he did earlier in the year, Commissioner Percy Dougherty is taking aim at a county proposal to fund grants for local police officers in high-crime areas.

Commissioners say the cuts are an attempt to balance the budget, which would use \$5.5 million from the \$16 million tax relief fund set up by the county in 2006. The county also plans to use almost \$7 million in surplus left over from last year's budget to fill a revenue gap of over \$12 million.

That gap has been a concern to Browning and other commissioners since the budget was introduced in August.

Cunningham has said the purpose of the tax relief fund is to cover the gap and has stressed that at 10.25 mills, his budget includes no tax increase.

"My proposed 2009 budget is a modest 1.1 percent higher than this year's budget. It contains NO tax increase and continues a balanced investment in the operations of Lehigh County government..." Cunningham said in his letter sent Tuesday.

It's unclear if Browning has the votes to pass any of his amendments. The commission is controlled five to four by Democrats, including Commissioner Sterling Raber of New Tripoli, a farmer who has made open space preservation his signature issue.

In addition, Cunningham holds a line-item veto on the budget and would have the power to restore cuts to the budget unless six commissioners support it.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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