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## Miami-Dade Commission approves budget with tax rate hikes

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CHARLES MOSTOLLER / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Miami-Dade county Mayor Carlos Alvarez. The Miami-Dade County Commissioners held the final public hearing on the 2011 year budget on September 23, 2010.

Miami-Dade County commissioners, defying a threat of a recall campaign, approved a budget and property tax rate hike that will raise November property tax bills for 60 percent of homesteaded property owners.

After a 10-hour meeting that stretched to 3:20 a.m. Friday morning, the panel voted 8-5 in favor of the administration's proposed budget, which was tweaked in recent days to restore funding for a list of programs and jobs to satisfy commissioners.

“What we have to do in this community is not allow ourselves to be bullied,” said Commission Chairman Dennis Moss. Referring to the specter of a recall led by Miami businessman Norman Braman, he added: “If I have to run against myself, I think I'll do OK.”

The \$7.3 billion budget for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 calls for hiking property tax rates 14 percent to offset the drastic plunge in property values and increases in various county fees. County parks will get new parking fees. Water bills will go up, too. To make ends meet, the county is also tapping reserves.

The moves enable Miami-Dade to plug a \$444 million budget gap that stemmed from the lower property tax values and a drop in other revenue, such as gasoline and sales taxes. It also provides pay raises for most county employees.

The tax rate increase will generate an additional \$178 million in property tax revenue. Meanwhile, salary and benefit increases will cost \$132 million. The county is benefiting, however, from concessions from its labor unions, including an agreement under which employees are pitching in 5 percent of salary to pay for health insurance. That will save \$90 million in the coming year.

To forge support for the administration's budget, County Manager George Burgess met individually with commissioners in recent days to figure out what changes were needed to ensure their backing of the budget.

Various commissioners had priorities, such as avoiding changes in the county-run Head Start program and maintaining current levels of funding next year for most community based organizations, which oversee various social services and cultural programs.

Another change: The county dropped a plan to dissolve the Department of Housing and Community Development that would have split its duties among other departments.

"I was ready to go the other way until I saw our constituents are going to be taken care of," said Commissioner Audrey Edmonson.

Other items spared the ax: The county will spend \$684,000 and keep seven full-time positions, restoring resources to the Government Information Center to continue video programming such as "Get to Know Your County Commissioner," which run on the county's TV channel and are available online. The final plan saved the job of one photographer, who is dispatched in part to take shots of commissioners at public events.

The final plan will save 258 job positions that were slated to be eliminated under the original budget. The county now expects to have 941 fewer positions than the current budget year, down from 1,199 cuts originally envisioned.

To pay for the increases, the county will tap more than \$7 million in reserves set aside for future services. It also will spend \$3.5 million in funds left over from the current year.

The commissioners voting in favor: Moss, Katy Sorenson, Barbara Jordan, Sally Heyman, Bruno Barreiro, Dorrin Rolle, Audrey Edmonson and Natacha Seijas. Against: Javier Souto, Carlos Gimenez, Rebeca Sosa, Joe Martinez and Jose "Pepe" Diaz.

On Wednesday, Braman -- who has previously bankrolled efforts to defeat county plans -- declared his intention to support and finance a recall campaign against the mayor and any commissioner who supports a tax rate hike.

To wage a successful recall battle, petitioners must get signatures from 4 percent of the county's 1.2 million registered voters -- about 48,000 -- within a 60-day period. If that's achieved and verified, commissioners would have to call a special election within 90 days.

On Wednesday, Braman, who hasn't identified who in the community he is working with, said he planned to gather signatures on Election Day in November, when turnout is expected to be heavy. He wasn't available for comment early Friday morning.

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