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County's financial shortfall shocking

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BROOKSVILLE — Until Monday, the citizens committee created to help determine local government's space needs dealt mostly with building requirements with far less attention to where the money to pay for the projects would come from.

But that all changed after Monday night's meeting when costs jarred the committee to attention.

Budget Director George Zoettlein told the group of 25 local residents the county was looking at as much as a \$400 million shortfall over the next 10 years unless new funding sources were created.

When the message sunk in, many committee members were stunned.

"I think we're all a little shell shocked," said Ferol Falzone-Long.

Until this week, the group focused mostly on the need for a new government building with an estimated and manageable cost of about \$40 million.

But Zoettlein said the county also needed during the next decade another \$30 million for two new parks, as much as \$45 million to maintain existing residential roads and \$292 million for new roads.

Despite expectations of about \$100 million in impact fee revenues during that period for parks and roads, Zoettlein warned there will still be a shortfall.

For many of the committee members, the news was overwhelming.

"It won't matter what we say in this room," said Tom Barnette. "We won't be able to solve the problem."

With more than just the \$40 million for a new government center at issue, a frustrated Barnette said he no longer understood the purpose of the committee, adding it might be nothing more than a "fall guy for some people."

Interim County Administrator Larry Jennings reminded the committee its only job was to make general recommendations to commissioners later this spring.

For committee member Lisa Hammond, the most daunting part of the estimated \$400 million shortfall was the \$292 million for new roads.

"(Roads) are congested but not to the tune of \$300 million," she said.

Many other needs "are bug spit compared to this \$292 million," Hammond said.

Zoettlein said an additional \$80 million was needed to pay for several smaller construction

projects, such as expanding the Animal Services building.

Committee chairman Len Tria said the group should address the money shortage issue by first prioritizing needs and discussing what projects could wait.

He also asked Jennings and Zoettlein to provide the committee with a more specific list of projects and all the county's estimated revenues that could be spent to pay for them.

But committee member Bob Kanner said he was not convinced the county needed what Zoettlein and other county staff said they did.

"Are we utilizing all the square footage in the ...government center," Kanner asked. "I don't think it's being used properly."

He complained of "tremendous waste" in some departments.

Kanner also called for the committee to create a list of priorities when it came to county building projects.

The committee will meet again 6:30 p.m., Monday March 6 at the County Recreation Department building on Fort Dade Avenue. Jennings said he would bring the committee additional space information for that meeting.

"We can't tell people we must raise \$400 million," Kanner said.

He equated the county's financial woes to what many county families face every day.

"Do we put food on the table or do we buy a wide-screen TV?" Kanner said.

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