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County OKs \$500,000 for development groups

Most requests only partially funded; budget exceeds projected revenues by over \$5.5 million

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Despite repeated assertions that they must keep the county's budget trim, Spokane County commissioners Monday approved almost \$500,000 in additional spending on outside economic development organizations.

As it stands, the \$133.6 million 2006 general fund budget exceeds projected revenues by more than \$5.5 million.

Most requests from groups outside the county weren't granted in full because of the tight budget, Commissioner Todd Mielke said.

"It's very important for people making supplemental requests to understand that," Mielke said. "We are literally spending more than we are taking in."

Commissioner Mark Richard said it will take at least two years for the county to bring its expenditures in line with its revenues. In the meantime, that means dipping into the county's reserve, which will be reduced to 10 percent of the general fund budget in 2006.

Commissioners are scheduled to approve the budget today.

Commissioners agreed to give several organizations funding above and beyond what was originally budgeted, including: **\$250,000 for the Institute for Systems Medicine**, \$75,000 for both the Spokane Area Economic Development Council and Connect Northwest, and \$50,000 for the International Trade Association.

Commissioners Phil Harris and Mielke declined to give \$50,000 to Eastern Washington University's entrepreneurial partnership with the AHANA minority business outreach program despite lobbying from Richard, who warned the group could be forced to dissolve without the money.

The only nonprofit or regional service group granted additional funding during the last-minute session was Care Cars, which was given \$45,000 more toward its mission of matching volunteer drivers with low-income senior citizens needing transportation. Other groups, including low

income medical provider Project Access, the Chase Youth Commission and Spokane City-County Historic Preservation, were denied their additional requests.

The decisions were the last round of financial wrangling before a Monday morning hearing on the budget.

Few people spoke at the hearing.

Nick Beamer, the executive director of Aging and Long Term Care, urged commissioners to give more money to Care Cars.

Commissioners agreed in an earlier session to allocate \$45,000 more than the original \$5,000 allocated to the group. But that's still well below the \$127,000 requested.

Also at issue at the hearing were salaries for Spokane County's deputy prosecutors.

Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Sharon Hedlund said those salaries lag as much as \$2,600 a month behind other counties' wage rates.

"We are unhappy with that," Hedlund said, adding that Spokane County's attorneys handle more cases than most of their counterparts across the state.

Commissioners are still considering a prosecutor's office request to hire additional lawyers.

Hedlund pointed out that the commissioners themselves are already 2006 budget winners.

Spokane County commissioners said Monday that they won't turn down \$11,000 raises a citizens salary commission awarded them over the weekend. The pay raise boosts the county commissioners' annual salary by 13 percent, to \$93,000 a year.

Salary review committee members based their decision on pay rates for commissioners in other counties.

Last year commissioners were awarded a \$7,000 pay raise.

Richard offered a simple "Yes" when asked if he would take the raise.

Mielke and Harris explained they would be taxed on the raises regardless of whether they donated them back to the county.

And Mielke asked why some people think the commissioners should go against the independent committee to decide the matter. That committee was created to take politics out of elected officials' salaries, he said.

"Shouldn't we do it all the way?" Mielke asked. "Do you want separation or not?"