

Budget Hearings #40 - 2025
Fairfield County Commissioners' Office
October 6, 2026

Commissioner Davis called the Budget Hearing Session to order at 11:00 a.m. with the following Commissioners also present: David Levacy and Steve Davis. Also in attendance were Jeff Porter, Rochelle Menningen, Bennett Niceswanger, Bart Hampson, Staci Knisley, and Taylor Forquer. Attendees of specific hearings are listed in their respective section of the minutes.

Each hearing has a corresponding Budget Summary and Excel spreadsheet that are included with the minutes.

Budget Hearing, Juvenile/Probate Court, 11:00 a.m.

Judge Terre Vandervoort and LeAnna Moyer were in attendance for the Juvenile/Probate court Budget Hearing. Also present: Patrick Epler.

Budget Director Bart Hampson reported a modest 0.2% increase in the 2027 budget and recognized LeAnna Moyer for helping reduce health insurance costs by 8.4%. Contractual services and court-appointed attorney costs remain stable.

Judge Vandervoort highlighted current initiatives within Juvenile Court and discussed cost-related challenges. She also noted positive outcomes from the truancy program in reducing juvenile detention placements.

Deputy County Administrator Porter reviewed performance evaluations and merit-based pay increases, providing supervisors with reference materials for their evaluations.

Budget Hearing, Veterans Services, 11:15 a.m.

Justin Messinger was in attendance for the Veterans Services Budget Hearing. Also present: Patrick Epler.

Justin Messinger explained that the requested increase in outreach funding would support technology training for veterans, widows, and spouses. The office is also expanding outreach to nursing homes, with particular attention to the needs of senior veterans.

Commissioner Fix requested additional details about the outreach activities taking place in nursing homes.

Deputy County Administrator Jeff Porter reviewed the merit-based increases included in the budget.

Commissioner Levacy expressed appreciation for the services provided by Veterans Services and asked whether the office had any unmet needs.

Messinger identified signage as the only additional need. Commissioner Levacy encouraged continued outreach efforts and regular communication with Jon.

Budget Hearing, Soil and Water Conservation District, 11:30 a.m.

Nikki Drake, Chad Lucht and Christina Holt were in attendance for the Soil and Water Budget Hearing. Also present: Patrick Epler.

Budget Director Bart Hampson reported that Soil and Water is requesting a \$40,000 increase to support changes in their support staff structure.

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Chad Lucht explained that the request is driven by increasing development activity in the county. The additional funding would allow the agency to hire a more experienced candidate rather than an entry-level graduate, and an offer has already been extended.

Nikki Drake expressed concerns about long-term staffing stability, noting upcoming retirements and frequent turnover due to better opportunities elsewhere. She emphasized the need to build a reliable team capable of sustaining the agency's workload and expertise.

Commissioner Fix highlighted the unprecedented rate of county growth and the importance of having qualified staff who can keep pace. He stated that delays in Soil and Water's response times should not become a barrier to development and expressed appreciation for the agency's service.

Deputy County Administrator Porter reviewed performance evaluations and merit-based increases, distributing a reference sheet for supervisors. Nikki Drake noted that in some years the agency has been unable to provide raises due to budget limitations.

Budget Hearing, Treasurer, 11:45 a.m.

Treasurer Jim Bahnsen, Michael Kaper and Jennifer Effinger were in attendance for the Treasurer's Budget Hearing. Also present: Patrick Epler.

Commissioner Fix inquired whether the office had hired the previous temporary employee. Michael Kaper confirmed that the seasonal employee had been brought on full-time. When asked which DETAC account would supplement the salary, Treasurer Bahnsen stated it would come from the Treasurer's DETAC fund.

Michael Kaper explained that cash collection poses the greatest risk in their operations. The office balances cash receipts daily, and collections are performed by staff within a 24-hour cycle. He noted that offering cash payments at the drive-through provides a significant benefit to taxpayers.

Treasurer Bahnsen described the drive-through as a locked facility with bullet-resistant protective glass. Although two small holes caused by rocks are present, the glass remains intact. Two staff members are always present when the facility is in use.

Commissioner Fix asked whether taxpayers have trouble paying cash in person. Kaper clarified that cash payments must be made in exact change because the office does not issue change. Expanding cash acceptance to the drive-through was intended as a convenience for taxpayers.

Commissioner Davis stated that, given the request for additional staffing, a follow-up hearing would be necessary.

Deputy County Administrator Porter noted that a temp service contract is typically a fixed cost, but that converting to an employee would require additional funding in the future due to potential merit increases and associated benefit costs. He also reviewed the performance evaluation and merit pay program.

Recess

With no further business, on the motion of Steve Davis and the second of Jeff Fix, the Board of Commissioners voted to move to recess at 12:05 p.m.

Roll call vote of the motion resulted as follows:
Voting aye thereon: David Levacy and Steve Davis

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Budget Hearing, Sheriff, 12:30 p.m.

The Board of Commissioners reconvened at 12:30 p.m. to continue the budget hearings.

Sheriff Alex Lape, Jared Collins, Scott Ervin and Elisa Dowdy were in attendance for the Sheriff's Budget Hearing.

Budget Director Bart Hampson reported a 6.8% increase in the 2027 budget, primarily due to rising costs in full-time employee salaries, prisoner medical expenses, office supplies, contract services, and fuel.

Sheriff Lape noted that projections for contract negotiations are included in the budget and are not expected to fluctuate more than one percent. To help manage rising fuel costs, the Sheriff's Office has implemented a protocol asking patrol units to park for up to 15 minutes each hour. He believes his requested increase, combined with offsets returned to the general fund, results in a lower net impact.

Deputy County Administrator Porter reviewed performance evaluations and merit-based pay increases, providing supervisors with an informational reference sheet.

Commissioner Fix asked whether staffing levels were changing.

Sheriff Lape stated no new positions are proposed; the office is working to fill previously approved positions. He also explained that software and equipment costs are rising due to the need to fully staff the Fairfield Center in Pickerington as a dispatching center, replace aging equipment, and pursue grant funding for the additional software.

In response to questions about the Pickerington Dispatch Center, Sheriff Lape said the facility is able to support events but is not designed for continuous 24/7 operation. Discussions about centralized dispatching with Lancaster and Pickerington occurred in the past, but technology differences prevent those cities from being certified in emergency medical dispatch.

Sheriff Lape reported that the transition to Next Gen technology was seamless, though the state's initial request for simultaneous county-city deployment was not feasible.

Commissioner Fix asked about a 15% increase in the captain's salary. Sheriff Lape explained that the increase reflects a non-union salary adjustment following the creation of a captain position through promotion.

Commissioner Levacy asked about the 7% increase in contract services. Sheriff Lape said that figure represents a forecasting assumption and that historically some of those funds are returned to the general fund, as unforeseen needs arise throughout the year.

Other updates included: the county continues to house some out-of-county inmates, though at reduced levels, and the Sheriff's Office continues to dispatch for the small villages.

Regarding staffing schedules, Sheriff Lape said 12-hour shifts remain popular and effective. He acknowledged the need for improvement of call-off procedures and estimated overtime expenses will be approximately \$250,000 lower than last year.

Commissioner Davis advised that a follow-up hearing would be needed.

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Budget Hearing, Prosecutors, 1:00 p.m.

Prosecuting Attorney Kyle Witt was in attendance for the Prosecutors Budget Hearing.

Budget Director Bart Hampson reported that the 2027 budget reflects a 5.3% increase over 2026. Areas of rising cost include contract services, vacation and sick leave payouts, health insurance, and equipment.

Mr. Witt noted that personnel costs align with the recommended 4% increase. He explained that vacation payouts appear high because he traditionally overestimates that line item. Contract services represent the largest area of movement; although the budget holds this line flat, they anticipate using FOJ funds to cover those expenses. He also reported spending \$35,000 on technology upgrades due to aging equipment.

Deputy County Administrator Porter reviewed performance evaluations and merit-based increases and distributed guidance for supervisors.

Commissioner Fix asked whether caseloads have changed over time.

Mr. Witt stated that overall caseload levels have remained consistent, though high-profile cases continue to require substantial staff resources. He also confirmed there have been no changes to personnel numbers or structure.

When asked about prosecuting drug-related death cases as murder, Mr. Witt explained that such cases are difficult to prove, though a dedicated detective handles them. In response to a question regarding the recent fatal accident on U.S. 33, he confirmed that he personally will prosecute the case.

Commissioner Davis indicated that a follow-up hearing would be appropriate. He also asked whether the Prosecutor's Office had consulted the Commissioners before approving pay increases during the year. Mr. Witt stated that he had not discussed those increases with the Commissioners' Office beforehand.

Budget Hearing, Coroner, 1:15 p.m.

Coroner Brian Varney and Kelly Frank were in attendance for the Coroners Budget Hearing.

Budget Director Bart Hampson reported an increase in salary costs of 4.7% and noted rising expenses in general office supplies, particularly operational supplies and body bags, which have become more costly.

Dr. Varney discussed the merit-based compensation protocol adopted several years ago and its continuing impact on both employee compensation and overall operational expenses. He also noted that several federal agencies have contacted the office regarding products transported across state lines. The office anticipates handling approximately 500 cases this year, a decrease from prior years.

Deputy County Administrator Jeff Porter commented on the positive effects of the merit-based program.

Commissioner Fix observed that suicides are outpacing other causes of death and asked whether any demographic patterns have emerged.

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Dr. Varney stated that no clear demographic trend has been identified. He expressed concern that societal disconnection and broader governmental and economic pressures may be contributing factors.

Commissioner Levacy asked about drug-related deaths.

Dr. Varney described trends in addiction and addiction management, including the evolving chemical composition of substances and the challenges these variations create for the office.

Kelly Frank reported that the office has begun billing for cases in which individuals are injured in another county but die in Fairfield County.

Budget Hearing, Dog Shelter, 1:30 p.m.

Dog Warden Leighann Adams was in attendance for the Dog Shelter Budget Hearing.

Budget Director Bart Hampson reported that he is developing a monthly expense report for Dog Shelter to improve tracking and transparency.

Dog Warden Adams presented year-over-year statistics and highlighted ongoing partnerships, including a collaboration with a local rescue to assist community members with spay and neuter costs. She expressed hope that this partnership will continue next year. She also outlined several challenges facing the shelter, including rising operational costs, impacts from the passage of Avery's Law, increased non-compliance among dog owners, and other cost pressures.

Commissioner Levacy asked how the shelter manages non-compliant owners.

Adams outlined shelter compliance procedures, including calls and mailings.

Deputy County Administrator Jeff Porter noted that mailed notices generally prompt action.

Adams added that staff make direct contact with owners when possible to update records and encourage proper licensure.

Budget Hearing, Human Resources, 1:45 p.m.

Jeff Porter and Abby Watson were in attendance for the Human Resources Budget Hearing.

Jeff Porter summarized a total budget increase of 9.5% higher than 2026. The increases include employee salary, contract services, training, and general office supplies.

Adjournment

With no further business, on the motion of Jeff Fix and the second of Steve Davis, the Board of Commissioners voted to adjourn at 1:54 p.m.

Roll call vote of the motion resulted as follows:
Voting aye thereon: David Levacy and Steve Davis

Seconded by: David Levacy

NAYS: None