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Miami-Dade commissioners OK flat property-tax rate that means library, fire cuts

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Peter Andrew Bosch / Miami Herald staff

Rowan Taylor, president of the International Association of Firefighters Local 1403, asks Miami-Dade commissioners to increase the property-tax rate to avoid fire-rescue cuts.

The Miami-Dade Commission voted Tuesday to keep the property-tax rate flat for the 2013-14 budget year, undeterred by the prospect of shuttering libraries and eliminating fire-rescue units.

Commissioners voted 8-4 to hold the line on the tax rate, which will require steep cuts and up to 400 layoffs in the county's library and fire-rescue departments. A plan to stop killing cats and dogs at the animal shelter that voters approved in a non-binding straw ballot last year will receive only bare-bones funding.

Mayor Carlos Gimenez, who had initially proposed a tax-rate hike to maintain services

and fully fund the animal-welfare plan, reversed course and late Monday recommended the flat rate instead.

"After listening further to our residents and community leaders, it is clear that there is no public support for a tax-rate increase right now," he said Tuesday.

Commissioners may lower — but not raise — the rate by the time they approve the budget after two public hearings in September. Between now and then, Gimenez said, his administration will try to identify ways to minimize the service cuts.

The board did sign off on an increase to the portion of the tax rate that pays for big-ticket construction projects voters approved in a bond question a decade ago, so many homeowners would still see a tax hike.

A homeowner with a taxable value of \$200,000 in an unincorporated neighborhood such as Kendall would pay \$27.32 more than last year in county taxes, which make up only a portion of a total tax bill. The increase will be higher if the home's property value has gone up; countywide, values rose 3.39 percent.

Several board members said the commission should have tentatively approved the higher tax rate, giving residents time to digest the potential cuts and county administrators a chance to come up with more alternatives.

"I just don't know that people will support getting rid of fire units," Commissioner Dennis Moss said. "I know that people won't support getting rid of libraries."

Two years ago, Gimenez's proposal to shutter libraries drew so much criticism that the administration ultimately backtracked on its plan. On Tuesday, Commissioner Barbara Jordan said she feared the latest round of cuts would disproportionately affect poor communities.

Her comments resonated at the Doral branch library Tuesday, where 17-year-old Andre Nucete, a rising senior at Ronald Reagan High and frequent library visitor, had planned to study for his upcoming SAT tests.

"I know a lot of people at my school that don't have access to the Internet; they come here for it," said Andre, who added: "It's going to affect a lot of kids."

But after more than five hours of public comments and dais discussion Tuesday, a majority of commissioners said they would not sign off on a tax-rate bump — even though several rued the potential cuts. Commissioner Javier Souto called libraries "sacred" and said closing one would be akin to closing a church.

"This is not the year to be talking about increases," Commissioner Juan C. Zapata concluded.

Voting in favor of the flat rate were Chairwoman Rebeca Sosa, Vice Chairwoman Lynda Bell and Commissioners Zapata, Bruno Barreiro, Esteban "Steve" Bovo, Jose "Pepe" Diaz, Javier Souto and Xavier Suarez. Voting against were Moss and Commissioners Jordan, Sally Heyman and Jean Monestime. Commissioner Audrey Edmonson was absent.

Six commissioners — Bell, Diaz, Heyman, Monestime, Sosa and Souto — face reelection next year.

Though commissioners are elected to non-partisan seats, the vote fell along strict political-party lines, with Republicans in the majority and Democrats in the minority.

Under the worst-case budget-ax scenario, nearly half of the county's 49 libraries — 22 — would be shut down, and six fire-rescue units, out of 139, would be eliminated. In addition, 251 library employees and 149 fire-rescue workers would be laid off.

Among the libraries on the chopping block is one regional facility, in West Kendall. The six fire-rescue units comprise three rescue trucks, two fire engines and a fire "platform," meaning a truck with a ladder.

Rowan Taylor, president of the International Association of Firefighters Local 143, said the cuts would require canceling a training class of 40 new firefighters, 28 of whom are military veterans.

"Yesterday they were told that if you vote for a flat fire-rescue millage, their jobs are done by the end of the week," he told commissioners.

The fire department picked the six units whose elimination would have the least effect on

residents, Gimenez said, either because they are located in stations with several units or in areas with relatively few service calls. The department serves unincorporated neighborhoods and 29 cities.

The library department made its closure list based on geography, trying to keep facilities open throughout the county, and on whether the libraries are in county-owned buildings or in storefronts. All 10 libraries in commercial buildings where Miami-Dade must pay rent would be closed. One of them is West Kendall Regional, which is housed in a strip mall.

At that library Tuesday, Martha Ramirez, 56, watched her two granddaughters checking out children's books. She used to take her children there to read, and now their kids use the facility. "I've always liked the programs they have for children," she said.

Between higher taxes or open libraries, she didn't think twice before choosing. "I would pay higher taxes, because this is important. Here you see what your taxes are paying for."

John J. Quick, president of Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library System, called the commission's decision "a true disappointment."

The vote, he said in an email to the Miami Herald, "will severely limit, if not eliminate, the library system's community programs, including its adult and childhood literacy programs, which are so important to the progress and success of this County."

Gimenez said the initial cuts contemplated by the departments had involved doing away with eight fire-rescue units and closing 42 libraries — all but the main downtown library and six other large ones.

The mayor said he preferred to keep the fire cuts to six units by reorganizing the department's administration to eliminate two division chiefs, 14 chief fire officers and a number of civilian jobs.

As for the libraries, he directed administrators to keep more libraries open but reduce operating hours. Libraries that are now open five days a week may go down to four days, and those open six days may go down to five.

Later in the meeting, commissioners decided to defer until Aug. 29 votes on six labor union impasses over a proposal in Gimenez's budget to extend several benefit concessions, including requiring most employees to contribute 5 percent of their base pay toward group healthcare costs.

Miami Herald staff writers Joey Flechas and Cory Nightingale contributed to this report.