

Gimenez calls budget the 'worst case' for Miami-Dade

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Mayor Carlos Gimenez called his proposed budget a "worst-case scenario" for Miami-Dade County on Thursday, and said he would fight for union concessions to prevent the proposed cuts.

Though he didn't slam the door shut on lifting the current ceiling on property taxes, he said he would "probably" veto any vote by commissioners to lift the maximum rate on Tuesday.

"I don't want to put my feet in concrete right now," Gimenez told the Miami Herald's editorial board. "I would probably veto it."

His comments left open the possibility of commissioners voting to allow for a tax increase once they adopt the final budget in September. At a meeting Tuesday, commissioners will vote on the maximum property-tax rates available for the budget. Gimenez this week proposed keeping the rates flat and cutting about 674 county jobs to close a \$64 million gap between revenue and expenses.

The county's public-safety unions are pushing for higher taxes to avoid layoffs, which include a loss of 315 police jobs. "Taxation is never a pleasant thing," said John Rivera, head of the Police Benevolent Association. "But it's a necessary thing."

Library advocates want a higher rate for the property tax that funds the county's library system, and are urging enough of an increase to boost the current \$50 million budget to \$64 million. On Thursday, the mayor dismissed that plan.

"You're talking about \$14 million more than we have today," he said. "We probably wouldn't know what to do with it." Currently the library tax only generates \$30 million a year, and the cash reserves that allowed a \$50 million budget aren't forecast to last beyond the fall. The Gimenez plan would boost the tax enough to support a \$45 million budget, accompanied by matching cuts in property taxes that fund countywide operations and the Miami-Dade fire department.

Libraries took the biggest hit from the 2011 tax cut Gimenez enacted during his first year in office, and advocates for higher funding pounced on the mayor's comment as lacking appreciation for the system's current squeeze.

"It was surprising," said John Quick, a Miami lawyer and head of the Friends of the Library nonprofit. "The professionals in the library would know what to do with it."

With planned job cuts, increases in bus fares and reductions of grant funding to non-profits, Gimenez said the \$6 billion budget doesn't represent the spending plan he wants for Miami-Dade.

"The budget we presented was a worst-case scenario budget," he said.

Gimenez pointed to the current budget, which assumed a continued 5-percent paycheck deduction for the county's healthcare fund. Commissioners ended the deduction in February, scrambling the county's budgeted costs. Rather than counting on payroll savings he hopes to secure in upcoming labor talks, Gimenez said he proposed a budget that assumes the unions will win back the remainder of the benefits they have conceded over the past three years. The mayor said he hopes to secure enough concessions to undo his proposed cuts.

"This is not the budget I am going to be fighting for," he said.

Gimenez argued unions and their backers on the county commission bear responsibility for the planned cuts, since they are only way to keep taxes down and still balance the budget. "We've got to get these costs under control," he said.

He's calling for workers to surrender the perks that union leaders agreed to suspend for three years on the heels of the 2011 tax cut. Those three-year contracts end in October, and the concessions will expire unless both sides agree to new contracts.

"What the unions are saying is raise taxes so we can get more," he said. "I am showing leadership. I'm saying no."