

NEBRASKA TAXPAYERS FOR FREEDOM ISSUE PAPER: DOUGLAS COUNTY MUST TRIM ITS EXPENSES.

BACKGROUND. Douglas County government must provide mandated services required by the state and federal government. The county also provides basic civic services such as legal and law enforcement services, jail services, assessor services, and community health services. However, the county now provides at its discretion non-mandated services, which, over the decades, have required more and more funding. Understand that property valuations eventually will decrease because of home sale price declines, so the county will reap fewer property tax dollars. The amount of vacant commercial office space is increasing, decreasing valuations. State legislation has decreased the amount of inheritance tax available to counties. Moreover, lack of prudent advance planning has witnessed first, a spike in expenditures for the new juvenile detention center population. Add a plea for a new mental health center. And next, a call for a new or expanded county building to handle increased law enforcement and judicial services. Foreseeing county officials should have anticipated but unfortunately did not anticipate the necessity for all 3 expenditures and failed to plan for them in aggregate in strategic planning. County government cannot sustain the present rate of spending. NTF believes that an expansion of county government responsibilities in future years will require an enormous property tax increase, noting that over 47% of the county budget supported by property taxes, unless county commissioners implement budget cuts and dispense with several non-mandated services.

STRATEGY. Determine what categories of expenses are likely to increase in future years, e.g., county corrections, judicial. Determine what categories of expenses may decrease during future years. Estimate what revenue sources will increase in future years, like grants, and which revenue sources may decrease, like the inheritance tax. Consider what services the state in future might fund or partially fund. Next, consider what non-mandated services the county can either trim or eliminate.

THE PROCESS. County commissioners should work with department and agency heads immediately to find budget cuts before the FY 2024-25 budget process begins. Actively solicit taxpayer input. At budget time, require each county department to use the same or similar template to show specific budgetary items, e.g., annual expenditure on specific categories with line items listed, annual revenues accrued, personnel numbers, etc.

NTF SUGGESTIONS FOR BUDGET CUTS:

- ✓ Eliminate the job slots of county public information officer and diversity officer.
- ✓ Conduct a personnel and services audit to see if the personnel force or job slots can shrink.
- ✓ Negotiate tighter rules for employee complaint investigations.
- ✓ Mandate that all step pay increases are earned raises.
- ✓ Mandate higher employee co-pays for health insurance and pension costs.
- ✓ Eliminate non-mandated services.
- ✓ Eliminate the law library or offer it to the City of Omaha government.
- ✓ Eliminate the Extension Center.
- ✓ Eliminate the GIS.
- ✓ Eliminate the Health Dept. Maternal & Child Health, WIC, health education, and dental clinic services. Costs have risen by 11%.
- ✓ Eliminate ENOA and ENCOR if duplicating similar state services.
- ✓ Make an interlocal agreement with UNMC and adjacent counties for operation of a new mental health center.
- ✓ Health Center should service only subsidized patients that county must legally serve.
- ✓ Allow UNMC to handle the Health Center long-term care operations.
- ✓ Merge Douglas Co. 911 services with adjacent county 911 operations.
- ✓ Generally, decide what areas the county can privatize or discontinue servicing.
- ✓ Privatize the Environmental Services ground maintenance services.
- ✓ Privatize the Purchasing Mail Room and Garage.
- ✓ Privatize road construction and maintenance services.
- ✓ Outsource microfilm services.
- ✓ Utilize additional space at 156th & West Maple Rd. to consolidate county offices.
- ✓ End funding for the County Fair, as most of Douglas County is urbanized.
- ✓ Lobby the legislature and Congress to allow use of property confiscated in criminal drug forfeiture cases for additional expenditures.

