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College of Marin faces \$700,000 shortfall

By Kelly Dunleavy
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With property values dropping, College of Marin expects to lose \$693,494 in unrestricted general funds for the school.

“Right now, we haven’t cut back on any programs,” said Al Harrison, vice president of college operations.

Property taxes, which are a primary source of revenue for the college, are “much smaller than in the past,” said Harrison. When the staff began budgeting in early spring, more than \$500,000 in lost revenues was expected. But now there may be an additional re-evaluation of property values, which could lead to a bigger loss in funds. A month ago, when the county revised its estimate of property taxes for the fiscal year, there were losses of nearly \$1 billion overall in the county.

“My hope is that they already built that into their projections,” said Harrison. If the revised projections haven’t been built into the county’s numbers, on which the college is basing its budget, there could be additional cuts of “hundreds of thousands,” said Harrison.

Additionally, state budget issues practically guarantee large cuts in the state’s funding of “categorical” programs at COM. Categorical funding includes money for specific areas such as programs for disabled students, the Education Opportunity Program and Cal Grants, the state-funded monetary grants given to students to help pay for college expenses. According to the Community College League of California, COM can expect over \$1.5 million in categorical cuts.

On June 23, Harrison presented a preliminary budget to the COM board of trustees that included a decrease of up to 15 percent in the budget of the departments that would be affected by the categorical cuts.

“We’re hopeful that’s the worst scenario,” said Harrison.

The proposed budget, which won’t be approved until August, ideally following a finalized state budget, currently includes a deficit. However, the staff is working on ways to remove that

deficit before a final budget is presented to the board. The current budget includes no increases in operating costs over the last two years and, while it doesn't freeze hiring, it has left some positions vacant.

The school cut its football program earlier this year, saving \$60,000 a year, and recently made news for condemning the running track and stadium bleachers because of the dangerous disrepair they were in. The college can't currently afford to fix them.

In 2004, a bond was passed to fund construction on the campus and modernization of facilities, a process which is "progressing along beautifully," said Harrison. The school recently broke ground on a new \$13.4 million fine-arts building, expected to be completed by 2011.

Another bond will not be put forth as a solution to the college's budget problems, said Harrison.

The state Legislature, which determines student fees for all community colleges, has also discussed raising the fees from \$20 per unit to \$26, but "they can't agree on anything in Sacramento," said Harrison.

As the state attempts to wrestle with its budget problems, the college will be wrestling with its own budget, attempting to find a solution to the loss in revenue and determine "how can we manage our organization so we can live within the revenues we receive, once we know what they are," said Harrison.

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