Health cuts avoided in approved budget

By Denis Cuff
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MARTINEZ — Contra Costa County will avert threatened health care cuts while funding a crackdown on domestic violence in a $1.3 billion budget county supervisors approved Tuesday.

County officials said they are relieved they could shift money between departments to avoid major health service cuts.

But they remain worried the juggling can’t go on much longer before major cuts are unavoidable because of continuing state and county property taxes coupled with inadequate state and federal funds to provide health care for the poor.

“IT’s a wait-and-see budget. It gives us another year to see what can be done about the serious financial pressures facing the county,” said County Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond. “The public sees the booming economy, but some levels of government - like the county - are not seeing the benefits.”

The $1.3 billion budget for the fiscal year that started July 1 is about $20 million more than last year. Some $5 million comes from state funds to fix local roads.

County officials earlier this year had warned of big health cuts as the county faced a financial squeeze. State and federal agencies are tightening rules on reimbursing county costs for health care for the poor. Meanwhile, the state plans this year to divert from $93 million to $98 million in county property taxes to education.

Supervisors voted in July to close the last county-run health agency that sends nurses to treat the sick or injured at home. The cut saved $650,000.

County administrators avoided more severe cuts by shifting money between departments and using higher property and vehicle license fees.

Supervisor Donna Gerber said she was pleased the board funded $1.6 million for a “zero tolerance” domestic violence program she proposed. The money will go to hire prosecutors, detectives, probation workers, clerks and others to crack down on people who abuse their spouses or the elderly.

Supervisors told mental health advocates Tuesday they were sympathetic but lacked the money to finance a community center for the mentally ill in West Contra Costa County.

Supervisors did direct administrators to look for grants or other funding sources for such a center.

The county contracts with nonprofit groups to operate centers in Martinez, Concord and Antioch, where people who have recovered from mental health problems counsel the mentally ill.

John Wolfe, executive director of the Contra Costa Taxpayers Association, called the budget reasonable, although his group is upset the county has scheduled a November ballot measure on a sales tax increase to fund libraries.

“They’re doing about as well as they can under the circumstances. They don’t have very much discretionary money,” Wolfe said.

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