

Commission haggles over making final budget cuts

By PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

The pain is expected to be over this week, as Oakland County commissioners finish doing something they've never had to do before: actually cut the budget.

"Actually it's the best thing we've ever had to do," said veteran; commissioner Marilyn E. Gosling, R-Bloomfield Hills. "It (cutting the budget) has forced each of us (including department heads) to take an inner look at how we do things."

At their final meeting of the year Thursday, Gosling and other commissioners are scheduled to adopt a new budget. While the figures aren't final, the recommended budget for 1994 is about \$421 million.

That's the highest in history, in part because it contains almost \$70 million in new community mental health funds never included before. Even without mental health, however, it's the largest budget in history.

But it could have been even higher, however. Since October, commissioners have been holding budget hearings to look for ways to cut to avoid dipping further into the county's fund balance.

Even this week, there will likely be last-minute horse trading and compromising, according to Commissioner David L. Moffitt, R-Farmington Hills.

Essentially the budget process this year is the same as it's been in the past, said Gosling, with a bit of irony in her voice. With one exception.

"We've always had to make tough decisions," said Gosling, who has been involved in county budgets since 1981. "But in previous years, the tough decisions have been 'What new positions do we fill?' or 'What new programs do we fund?'"

"This time it's, 'What programs do we cut?' and 'Who do we lay off?'"

So far Oakland has been able to avoid layoffs. But the county has done some things it's never done before, including:

■ Eliminating 120 jobs, mostly in the direction of Executive L. Brooks Patterson.

■ Instituted an early-out retirement program aimed at those nearing retirement. At the latest count, 249 of about 450 eligible employees have accepted the buyout.

Layoffs are dependent, in part, on whether the early-outs will save enough money while also absorbing those workers whose jobs were eliminated, according to personnel director C. Vincent Luzi.

Patterson's role in the budget cuts, ironically, has drawn praise from an unlikely source, commissioner Larry R. Pernick, D-Southfield, who is the highest-ranking elected Democrat in Oakland County.

Pernick has criticized Patterson on numerous occasions. But in this case, "I think the executive made a good-faith effort to cut fairly, across the board," said Pernick.

Commissioner Kevin A. Millner, whose 5th District includes part of West Bloomfield, said budget cutting "the toughest in recent history for Oakland — is a hint of things to come, especially if the school funding cuts are permanent."

"If those cuts are permanent," he said, "Oakland could face a \$20 million cutback in state funding next year. So we could be facing even bigger cuts in the future."

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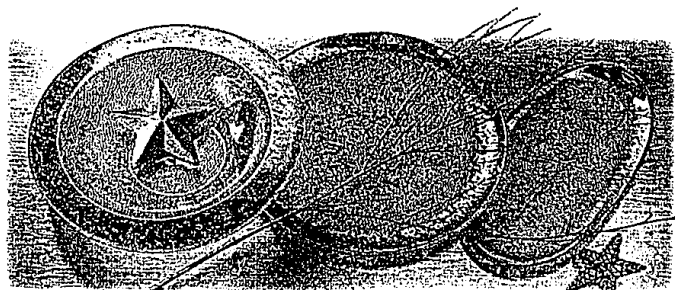
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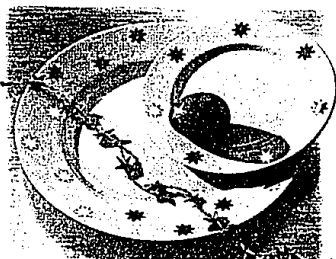
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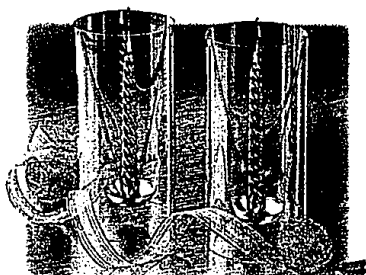


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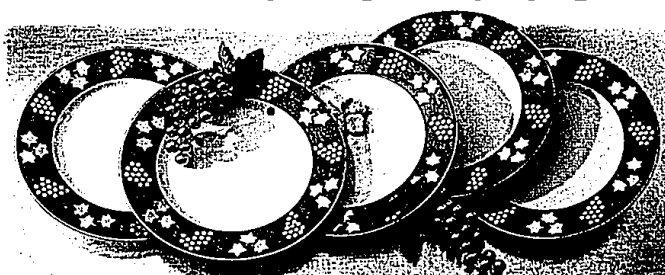


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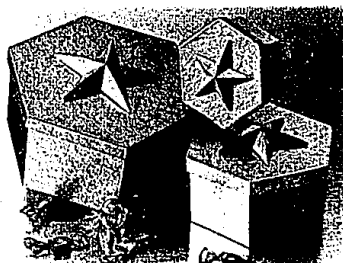
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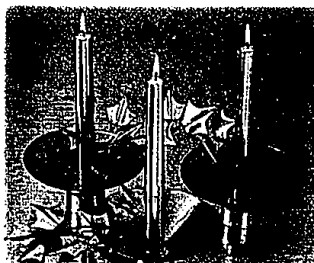
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