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Sonoma County officials warn of possible job cuts due to October wildfires and other financial difficulties

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Sonoma County may need to cut some jobs from its 4,000-member workforce in the coming months due in part to the severe financial strain from the October wildfires as well as unrelated budgetary challenges in some departments, officials said Monday.

The county's human services department is asking the Board of Supervisors for approval Tuesday during budget hearings for the next fiscal year in June to move forward with plans to eliminate 13 positions, nearly all of which are vacant.

Separately, the human resources department is seeking the board's authorization to prepare for additional job reductions, citing the \$14.2 million shortfall expected in the next fiscal year because of the 2017 fires and financial problems in the health department.

Christina Cramer, the county's human resources director, did not know exactly how many people could be laid off but hoped less than 30 would lose their jobs. One way to reduce the number of laid-off employees is for the county to find them jobs elsewhere, either within the same department or another.

"As we know more, we want to be proactive in making sure that we're doing everything we can," Cramer said. "If departments are going to have to do any reductions, then this is the approach that we're going to take in order to mitigate any employees losing their jobs altogether."

County officials don't expect anything like the cuts faced during the height of the recession, when hundreds of jobs were removed from local government payrolls. But they're bracing for some modest reductions as certain departments try to right-size their budgets and fire-related costs and revenue losses continue to pile up.

"It's a culmination of all of the above," said Supervisor David Rabbitt, the board's vice chairman. "Certainly, the fire-related thing doesn't leave us any dollars to float through these harder times."

Joel Evans-Fudem, president of the Sonoma County chapter of SEIU Local 1021, the county's largest union, questioned whether any job reductions were necessary, pointing to comments from economists who have predicted the county would have a healthy recovery from the fires.

"We don't think it's the time to be cutting services whatsoever," Evans-Fudem said. "The county's gotten nothing but good economic news, and they're not factoring any of those estimates into their budget. And when it comes down to it, the county's been squirreling away a massive rainy day fund for years."

County leaders should "absolutely" dip into their \$53 million reserve if it's necessary to avoid cutting services, Evans-Fudem said.

Human services leaders have said they need to cut 13 jobs — which include children's residential care counselors — due to increased operating costs for the next fiscal year that have resulted in a \$1.5 million budget gap. Cramer anticipates one person being laid off and another person whose employment will be cut in half, she said.

The health department previously shelved plans to cut more than 30 jobs this year from its mental health and substance abuse services staff after securing \$2 million in critical funding from the state government.

Supervisors later tapped into about \$1.9 million in tax and redevelopment funds to carry the behavioral health division through the rest of the fiscal year, but officials warned of further cuts in the coming year when the health department faces a deficit of up to \$19 million.

Barbie Robinson, the county's health director, has previously characterized the behavioral health funding challenges as stemming from "poor fiscal forecasting, the lack of internal controls and operational inefficiencies." Behavioral health officials consistently overprojected the amount of federal funds they would receive, assistant health services director Rod Stroud told supervisors in March.

"Both of the departments that are talking about having reductions — neither of them have anything to do with fire or overall budget," Evans-Fudem said of the health services and human services departments. "Department of Health is in the place they're in, but that's not really an overall funding problem. It's long-term mismanagement."

Cramer acknowledged that layoffs are possible in other departments, but she didn't have specifics.

"The extent of the fire impacts is still uncertain," she said. "It's just too early to tell still. But the county has a lot more expenses and a lot of things to do and we need to figure out a way to do it."

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