

Jail guards cut from county budget

By Chris Joyner Staff Writer

Seven new county jail guards did not make it into the proposed fiscal 2003 Hamilton County budget, despite fears that overcrowded, understaffed conditions at the jail could trigger a lawsuit, Sheriff John Cupp said Monday.

The proposed budget, unveiled last week by County Executive Claude Ramsey, would increase the sheriff's budget by just under \$900,000 to \$20.4 million. That figure is \$1 million shy of the amount Sheriff Cupp requested, with the bulk of the cuts coming from the jail, according to County Finance Administrator Louis Wright.

Sheriff Cupp said he understands the county's difficult financial situation.

"They just feel that the money is not there, and that's unfortunately correct," he said.

But he said that may not protect the county from an inmate filing suit over conditions at the jail.

"Then we're going to be in a lot of trouble," he said. "The court has ruled lack of money is not a defense."

Hamilton County Commission Chairman Bill Hullander said he understands the need for more corrections officers, but this is not the year to add new workers to the county payroll. The proposed \$462.6 million budget represents a 2.2 percent increase over the current fiscal year's budget, with just under \$10 million in increased spending.

The sheriff's office is not alone in seeing its requests for new spending cut, he said.

"Several departments came before us and requested things we felt were good things to do," he said.

Mr. Hullander said until state legislators can agree on a state budget that gives more security to local governments, he cannot see spending more of the county's rainy day fund. Mr. Ramsey's proposed budget already draws \$3.1 million out of the county's cash reserves to meet spending projections.

Mr. Wright said the sheriff's office comes out better than most departments in the proposed budget. While the figures show a cut of \$1 million in requested funds, that figure includes \$623,000 in grants accounted for elsewhere in the budget, he said.

Only \$377,000 was cut from Sheriff Cupp's requested budget, he said.

"The biggest chunk of that does relate to additional personnel requested primarily at the jail," he said.

Sheriff Cupp had requested funding for six new corrections officers, one corrections sergeant, five clerks and four food service workers. The salary for the new positions was budgeted at \$376,770, according to county documents.

Prior to last month's budget hearings, Corrections Chief Jim Hart said the county jail has a capacity of 489 prisoners, but routinely has 600 or more inmates at any given time. An outside study done in 1993 when the downtown jail was renovated determined that 160 officers were needed to effectively run the jail, but Chief Hart has a staff of 140, many of whom work mandatory overtime.

Mr. Ramsey recently announced the county has received a \$2 million federal grant to build a 128-bed expansion at the Silverdale Workhouse. Sheriff Cupp said the expansion will help solve problems at the county jail, but it will not be completed and occupied for at least another two years.

The sheriff said he knows Hamilton County is not unique in its problems with its jail. As president of the Tennessee Sheriffs Association, Sheriff Cupp has visited many jails around the state.

"There are very few counties out of the 95 that don't have a problem with their jail," he said.

The county commissioners have scheduled a June 27 vote to finalize the budget. The new fiscal year begins July 1.

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