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NEWS

COVID-19 strained Franklin County finances, but no tax increases in the works

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The COVID-19 pandemic revealed many societal ills in 2020 as public officials and the community struggled to deal with its deep effects.

"I think what the pandemic amplified and exacerbated is the disparities and discrepancies in the community," Kevin Boyce, president of the Franklin County board of commissioners, said on Monday.

That shows in some of the numbers that commissioners dealt with in 2020.

The county distributed \$76 million in federal CARES Act money, some of it being funneled to small businesses, nonprofits and eviction prevention.

The commissioners also issued a special \$1.5 million grant to prevent evictions, money which was spoken for within 48 hours after they announced the program.

Franklin County Job and Family Services issued more than \$2.3 million in one-time emergency assistance for low-income families, including money for rent and mortgage payments, utilities, auto repairs and bus passes.

"We had to zero in on some of those disparities and level the playing field," Boyce said.

County commissioners plan to discuss the state of the county during their 9 a.m. meeting on Tuesday.

In December, commissioners approved a \$493 million budget in general fund spending for 2021 with no tax or fee increases, but cutting some expenses.

Proposed spending for 2021 expects to be down about 4% from 2020, as revenues sagged in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Commissioners did not have to tap the county's \$62.5 million rainy day fund, but did have to dip into some reserve funds, Boyce said.

Still, Boyce said the state of the county is good, and that the county should not have to raise any taxes.

Franklin County Commissioner Marilyn Brown agreed.

"I'm pretty certain we'll be OK," Brown said "We've managed well during the time in there."

"We budgeted fairly conservatively. Things are starting to look better with the sales tax. Things have been looking extraordinarily well with the real estate tax compared to where we've been," she said.

Boyce said it is hard to project where the county will be in the fourth quarter of 2021 with so many unknowns.

"Any tax increase in the short term is not something I'd want to see. We've got a ways to go before we come out of this pandemic," Boyce said. He said he's hopeful the economy will rebound so commissioners can put more money toward job creation, and focus on continuing problems facing the community, especially low-income residents.

"How do we ensure access to broadband for everybody, first-mile, last-mile access to everybody?" Boyce said. "I think (the pandemic) gave us a chance to step back and look at the region."

In 2020, commissioners approved \$4.5 million for affordable housing projects, which leveraged another \$51.6 million in private investments toward 305 new units.

"Affordable housing is one of our long-term investments," Boyce said, pointing out that poverty is growing in Franklin County's suburbs, where housing advocates are pushing for more affordable housing.

CARES Act funding to the county that commissioners allocated paid for \$3.2 million through the Columbus Urban League for small business assistance and \$2.9 million for homeless assistance through the Community Shelter Board.

Another \$3 million of that money went to Franklin County Stadium Inc., which operates county-owned Huntington Park, where the 2020 Columbus Clippers season was wiped out.

"I think people understand we have a responsibility," Brown said of the ballpark money. "We do own that team and the park."

Nonprofit organizations that received CARES Act funding were contractually required to submit final written reports as to how money was spent.

Commissioners said that there remains a lot of need this year as the pandemic continues, but they cannot sustain that level of aid without more help from the federal government.

Boyce also pointed to the \$2.5-million Rise Together Innovation Center that will be opening shortly, a think-tank to come up with ideas to deal with poverty, including a possible expanded childcare subsidy and universal preschool program.

"There, we'll take ideas and try to vet them and grow them," he said. "That really allows us to try some new things."

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