

"Federation Corner" column  
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## **Two on the budget**

**First budget decrease in 42 years: let's not continue kicking the can down the road** by Chuck Lapinski, MCCF Public Finance and Utilities Chair

The County Executive began the current fiscal year by making some modest but necessary cuts in spending to the current year's operating budget to close a gap in revenues and, as a down payment against the originally projected \$400+ million dollar deficit for FY 2011. By the time the FY 2011 budget was submitted, the projected deficit had grown to \$779 million. Long term, the projected structural deficit continues to exceed \$4.10+ billion over the next six years.

For the past 8 years we have questioned the advisability and prudence of committing to future expenditures that we thought were likely to exceed revenues. The past years and their projected future budgets were built on spending rates that were simply unsustainable without significant increases in taxes and fees. These increases never happened.

If we continue to "kick the can down the road," we will only delay and stunt the economic rebound we would all like and future growth. This will also stunt our current and future quality of life.

Yes! You read right. The County is being forced by "shear" economics--serious declines in revenues from all virtually all sources--to cut back. The recession and continued decline in revenues has forced a decrease in our budget essentially across the board. Almost every part of the budget will suffer cutbacks. Unemployment and underemployment rates throughout the County, State and region also continue at historically high levels, and are only showing some feeble signs of slowing, not declining.

The really big question is: how much of this budget will be the "can" that is kicked down the road for future councils and executives to solve. A major portion of our current revenue and expenditure problem can be traced to the decisions of both past and current councils and executives. Do any of them now have the guts to take the unpopular measures needed to rein in the structural factors that have driven our ever-mushrooming public expenditures?

**Future of 11 park recreation centers uncertain** by Carole Ann Barth, MCCF Park and Recreation Chair

On February 9, the County Council voted to temporarily close 11 recreation centers as part of a package of cost reductions to the current (FY10) operating budget. Now the question is whether the Council will decide to re-open them in FY11 or close them permanently.

Also unknown is whether there will be a fully transparent discussion of the costs and benefits associated with this decision. For that to occur there needs to be open access to the details of the proposed budget.

It would also be wise to take a closer look at the individual buildings. These facilities have been characterized as in "fair" or "poor" condition.

Supposedly, closing them would save the County additional money that would otherwise be needed for expensive repairs and renovation. Yet the recreation center in North Four Corners Local Park has only recently been renovated with a new foundation, air conditioning system, and roof installed.

This made us curious, so we looked at six of the eleven buildings. They all appeared to be sound and basically in good repair. We saw no cracks, signs of settling, or crumbling foundations. Exterior walls (whether log, brick, siding, or cinderblock) showed no damage or staining. The roofs and air conditioning units appeared to be in good shape and of reasonably recent origin. So a rushed decision to close these facilities may actually waste capital already invested in upkeep rather than avoiding future expenses.

The other rationale for closing these particular 11 buildings is that they are considered “underutilized”. Facility users know, however, that the reservation and permitting system is itself an obstacle to improved usage rates. Booking two groups for the same time slot, lost bookings, reserved but unused time slots that aren’t released; confusing and awkward online reservation pages; and inflexible time slots all conspire to make facility booking a painful, frustrating and time-consuming process.

In addition, renters have always had to pick up building keys and sign papers during the work day necessitating taking time off from work. Ironically, now that buildings have been closed for underuse, the Parks permit office will be providing evening hours for key pickup.

Once again, we ask the Council to get all the facts before considering permanently closing these facilities. This should include serious consideration of a consolidated reservation and permitting system managed by one staff. How can the County possibly justify maintaining multiple software copies and reservation staffs for park, recreation, and school facilities while cutting the services those very systems are meant to provide? Supposedly, this is because each agency has different rental policies. It is well past time to create a unified rental policy and single office to handle permits, reservations and keys. Redundant and duplicative offices are costly and counterproductive.

For many neighborhoods, these buildings function as important community space. A recent article from Park Talk, the Newsletter of the Urban Parks Institute, expressed this beautifully: “...a good place works well not because of an aesthetic appeal, but because it is neighborly – it draws people in and enables them to relax companionably. It might not look like much, but it knits its residents together as they while away time together and it is seen as the place to be!”

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [theelms518@earthlink.net](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*