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Erie County Executive Chris Collins discusses his budget Friday morning during a news conference in the Rath Building.

Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News

Collins' budget proposes 223 layoffs

Library's subsidy is cut by \$4 million

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Chris Collins lays off 223 current county employees, cuts the library system's subsidy by \$4 million and ends a popular summertime youth program in an attempt to balance next year's Erie County budget without raising the property tax rate.

The county executive today intends to unveil a plan to spend \$1.14 billion running the government next year, financing large-scale improvement projects, paying off debt and covering the unemployment insurance for those laid-off workers. That's about a 1 percent increase from this year.

The county also will distribute nearly \$300 million of its sales tax revenue to municipalities, school districts and the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority. Collins excludes that sum when discussing county government spending.

He keeps the property tax rate at \$5.03 for every \$1,000 of assessed value, before charges that vary by town. Even with the tax rate remaining the same, Collins

estimates the government will collect about \$3.2 million more from property owners next year -- for \$235.6 million -- because of increased property values and new construction. However, the tax base value rose 1.4 percent when Collins had counted on 4 percent.

The government has ample reserves -- \$74 million by Collins' measure -- mostly from federal stimulus dollars for counties that pay a portion of their Medicaid programs. But he does not want to spend the surplus on recurring expenses.

Heading into an election year, he insists on closing a deficit of about \$30 million by cutting spending rather than raising taxes. The layoffs are spread across several departments. He also is dropping from the payroll another 187 positions currently vacant. Budget officials figure they are saving about \$14 million in salaries and benefits -- though that will be offset by a projected \$2.9 million in unemployment insurance payouts.

The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library has been bracing for a cut. Collins wants to give the system \$18.2 million next year, rather than \$22.2 million. However, he says the library system has received efficiency grants from the county control board and has built up its own rainy day fund of \$3.3 million.

Collins' budget reveals that he expects the City of Buffalo in October 2011 will begin holding its own defendants awaiting arraignment, rather than placing them in the Erie County Holding Center. Many officials agree that the current arrangement, reached in 2004, failed miserably because Holding Center officials could not figure out how to handle the volume of defendants.

Collins also is ending county participation in the "Operation Prime Time" summer program, which involved thousands of children, because of state cuts in its support.

The budget also ends, as revealed days ago, \$625,000 in support to dozens of theaters, museums and dance troupes. As long as he remains county executive, Collins wants to give cultural aid to just 10 institutions he deems regionally significant, such as the Buffalo Zoo, the Science Museum, Albright-Knox Art Gallery and Burchfield Penney Art Center.

While his move has been criticized, Collins defends the decision in a letter he will send the Legislature to further explain his budget: "My administration made the decision to invest taxpayer dollars in cultural organizations that make a significant impact on our local economy and draw not only local patrons but visitors from outside our community," he said, adding that he is willing to give those 10 institutions a total \$4.4 million next year.

Among the layoffs, Collins guts the auditing unit run by Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz, a political rival. If the Legislature goes along, Collins would lay off five of Poloncarz's seven auditors, three cashiers and six other support staff for 14 layoffs in all, about a third of the comptroller's work force.

"I will certainly be the first to say his Audit Division has been a very political group,"

Collins said Thursday. "It would be my contention that the majority of their audits have been political, not taxpayer-focused audits."

Among examples he cited is the Poloncarz report on how well-connected county employees park for free in county-owned lots. The report was begun after Collins kicked some of Poloncarz's employees out of the Rath County Office Building garage.

"All he's trying to do is overturn the results of last year's election," responded Poloncarz, who was re-elected in 2009 over a Collins-backed Republican.

"He is trying to beat me into submission. If he has cut my office by 33 percent, he is doing it out of spite. This is exactly what you get with a guy who claims not to be political but is the most political county executive you can get," he said. "I will do whatever it takes to protect the integrity of the Comptroller's Office."

Of the county's elected leaders, Poloncarz's department takes the hardest hit. The Legislature and county clerk suffered no cuts, Collins said. He said District Attorney Frank A. Sedita III will lose three people, but he accommodated Sedita with other changes that keep his 2011 budget near 2010 levels. Collins said the county Board of Elections loses no personnel.

As for Sheriff Timothy B. Howard's office, Collins said he kept the strength of the Jail Management Division's sworn personnel intact, though Howard wanted more employees to supervise inmates at the Correctional Facility in Alden and downtown Holding Center.

Collins said the superintendent of the Jail Management Division, Robert A. Koch Jr., will have to go without the raise that Howard had sought. Debate raged when Howard asked the Legislature to bump up Koch's salary by \$10,000, to \$105,000 a year, even though the State Commission of Correction and U.S. Justice Department had identified so many problems with the county's jail system. When the Legislature balked, Howard tried to arrange the raise with his own bureaucratic maneuvers. But it remains in limbo, and Collins says that for 2011 he budgets Koch at his current salary, roughly \$95,000, while also cutting the pay for some Howard administrators.

Meanwhile, Collins cuts 11 deputies who provide security in and around the Rath County Office Building but expects they will move into road-patrol jobs when some road deputies choose to retire this year. An arbitrator has awarded their union raises but expects them to contribute to their health insurance. By retiring, the deputies can receive free health care in retirement.

The budget proposal was still being printed late Thursday, so a detailed review could not be conducted. However, he said he cut six employees from his County Attorney's Office, 15 from the 1,400-employee Department of Social Services, 20 from the Probation Department and 47 from the Health Department, including 22 employees who used to work at county clinics Collins has closed.

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