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Supervisors vote to lay off 411 from county rolls

Elimination of 986 vacant positions approved, also

By Helen Gao, STAFF WRITER

More than 150 county employees packed the Board of Supervisors meeting yesterday to ask that their jobs not be eliminated as officials look for ways to absorb at least $153 million in state budget cuts.

Some of the workers take care of flower beds at county buildings. Some help place severely neglected and abused children in foster families. Some collect child support payments. Some fill out eligibility paperwork to help the poor qualify for food stamps.

Despite employees' pleas, the supervisors voted unanimously to hand out layoff notices to 411 workers and to eliminate 986 vacant positions. The reductions amount to about 7 percent of the county's work force of nearly 18,000.

"These are very difficult times for all of us who sit on the board," said Supervisors Chairwoman Dianne Jacob, who expressed sympathy for the workers.

If the state budget outlook does not improve, layoffs will take effect July 8. County officials are trying to place workers facing layoffs in other jobs.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is expected to release a revised budget tomorrow. In January, he proposed permanently shifting $1.3 billion a year in property taxes from local governments to the state. That would mean a $55 million annual loss for San Diego County.

Under a tentative compromise Schwarzenegger reached this week with local governments, the county would lose $28.9 million a year for the next two years.

No matter what Schwarzenegger and the Legislature decide on property tax revenue, Chief Administrative Officer Walt Ekard said layoffs are inevitable because the county expects to lose $98 million in funding for

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Many workers targeted are in child programs

programs that the state requires it to provide, mostly for social services.

"We have got to maintain a structurally balanced budget. That means tough decisions have to be made," Ekard said.

Most of the workers targeted for layoffs are in child support collection, juvenile probation, building maintenance and social programs for children, seniors and the medically indigent.

Gilbert Garcia of La Mesa expressed shock at the possibility of losing his job as a laborer after spending nearly three decades working for the county.

"After 29 years, I get laid off. I just can't understand," he said. "Why after 29 years of doing a faithful job? I have a family to support."

Other speakers warned that society will be hurt by the layoffs.

Jerry Skradski, representing the Probation Officers Association, said there will be less supervision of juvenile delinquents with the county's proposing to lay off 64 probation workers on top of staffing cuts made last year.

"We don't see how public safety hasn't been compromised by that," he said.

Robert Pitt of Santee, one of 124 workers facing layoff in the Department of Child Support Services, said more families will end up on welfare because fewer public employees will be collecting support on their behalf.

"The children will be the ultimate victims," Pitt said.

Yesterday was the first time supervisors met on the fiscal 2005 budget, which starts July 1. Public hearings on the proposal begin June 7, and supervisors are expected to decide on program and service cuts the last three days of June.

Helen Gao: (619) 718-5181; helen.gao@uniontrib.com

County budget hearings

The Board of Supervisors will hold public hearings on its proposed $3.96 billion budget for fiscal 2005 at 9 a.m. June 7-8. The hearings could continue weekdays through June 16.

- **WHERE:** County Administration Center, 1600 Pacific Highway, Room 301.
- **SCHEDULE:** Call the board's clerk at (619) 531-5434.
- **BUDGET DETAILS:** Online at www.sdcounty.ca.gov/auditor/cpplan/proposedlist.html.