

# Cobb chair proposes \$1.2B budget with no new taxes

The budget funds employee pay raises and adds 148 new positions to address public sector staffing shortage.

By Brian Eason | brian.eason@ajc.com

**C**obb Chairwoman Lisa Cupid on Tuesday proposed a \$1.2 billion budget that seeks to replenish the county's depleted staff without raising taxes.

If adopted, the spending plan for the 2023 fiscal year that starts Oct. 1 would fund pay raises and better benefits for many county workers to combat a staffing crisis that has left nearly 700 positions vacant in the wake of the pandemic.

The proposed budget also funds 148 new full- and part-time workers – the largest increase in at least 20 years but still well short of the 658 additional positions that department heads had requested.

And at Cupid's request, the budget would raise the lowest paid workers' wage to \$17 an hour, up from as low as \$11.50 today.

"We want to make sure that all of our employees are valued, because that's how we provide value to citizens," Cupid said.

The proposal represents a \$115 million or 11% increase from the current budget, down slightly from the \$178 million increase that county officials initially requested. Thanks largely to the county's booming property values, Cobb finance officials say it can be funded without increasing the county's property tax rate.

The proposal encountered immediate opposition from the two Republicans on the Democrat-led commission, who said it went too far to address the county's staffing needs.

Commissioner Keli Gambrell, a west Cobb Republican, said increasing the minimum pay to \$17 an hour might not be sustainable without



At the request of Cobb Chairwoman Lisa Cupid, the budget would raise the lowest paid workers' wage to \$17 an hour, up from as low as \$11.50 today. KARLL. MOORE/MOORESHOTS LLC

future tax increases.

"We might not have this digest growth in two years," Gambrell said. "...The last time we had a tax increase, it hit them (low-income renters) the hardest," because apartment owners don't receive a property tax break offered to homeowners.

Commissioner JoAnn Bir-

rell, a Republican who represents east Cobb and part of Marietta, said the county should fill its vacancies first, then come back for additional positions as needed.

In response, County Manager Jackie McMorris said the budget had already been cut down to the most critical needs in each department.

"There is no additional scrubbing" to do to the budget, McMorris said. "What you would be saying to them is do your job continuously without the resources you need to do it."

An Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis found that Cobb's staffing levels have not kept up with the county's population growth over the last 20 years. In 2020, the county employed 63 fewer workers per 100,000 people than it did in 2001. When the pandemic hit, vacancies surged, further straining county services.

Last month, the commission voted unanimously to provide \$1,500 bonuses to some workers to prevent further departures before the next budget.

In addition to raises, the budget would reduce the vesting period for retirement benefits to five years from 10. A study found that Cobb workers are paid around 8% less than other public sector employers in the metro area and have to work longer to qualify for retirement benefits.

The commission will hold the first public hearing on the budget and the proposed millage rate July 12, with a final vote set for July 26.