



## Taos County budget 'basically balanced'

By Cody Hooks

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Taos County's budget for the upcoming fiscal year stands to be more efficient thanks to a reorganization of internal departments and federal funding.

The budget is "basically balanced" for the first time in years, according to Taos County Finance Director Leandro Cordova.

The county submitted its preliminary budget to the state Department of Finance and Administration by June 1. Final approval comes in the fall, after the start of the county's fiscal year.

Cordova said this budget follows several years of bare-bones finances brought about by the county taking over financial operations of the Taos County Seniors Program (formally Ancianos), reorganizing the housing authority and slowly paying off the debt incurred from building the new county complex.

"We have growing needs, but no increased revenue," Cordova said.

To make the county's operations more economically efficient, a number of departments were reorganized. The finance department took over the billing for the county's utilities (formerly handled by facilities). The county created a "fleet department," bringing the county's four mechanics together to maintain everything from equipment to the sheriff department's patrol cars. Taos County also created a two-person "complex department" to run the county facilities on Albright Street, which is starting to show signs of wear and energy inefficiencies.

Projected revenue for the county did increase, from \$11.4 million in fiscal 2015 to \$12.6 million in 2016. A gross revenue tax that was formerly earmarked for indigent patients at the hospital was repurposed to be used in the general fund of the county.

Furthermore, Cordova said, the county reorganized how and when it spends PILT (Payments in Lieu of Taxes) funds from the federal government and is meant to compensate for the untaxed federal lands within the county. In the past, PILT was factored into the general operating budget. But that was risky, as the actual money doesn't hit the bank account until the last two weeks of the county's fiscal year.

"We receive [PILT] payments in June, and with truthfully no time to spend it," Cordova said.

Should the federal government not approve PILT allocations for Taos County, as almost happened in 2013, the county would have to lay off people to compensate for the difference.

PILT is now funneled into capital enhancement, or projects that aren't recurring expenses. During fiscal 2016, PILT is allocated to six-eight road projects, purchasing and repairing equipment, and remodeling facilities such as the Chamisal transfer station.