

Budget Guidance

In Virginia counties, the governing body's fiscal control is exercised through two distinct processes: budgeting and appropriations.

- Budgeting is a planning process required by law that enables the Board of Supervisors to examine demands for County funds, to anticipate revenue needs, and to make decisions about the priority of programs and level of services to be provided. In other words, the County's budget is a work plan expressed in terms of dollars and cents, and as such, is an important tool of fiscal management. The budget is a document that summarizes all public service programs provided by the government. It is the annual plan for coordinating revenues and expenditures. The budget brings together all County government operations in summary form.
- The appropriations process, on the other hand, is the mechanism by which funds are made available for spending on those programs and operations that the governing body has decided to support.

The Nature of the Budget

The Code of Virginia states that a County budget shall be developed for "informative and fiscal planning purposes only." It is prepared, developed and considered by the Board of Supervisors as a plan for County operations, maintenance, capital outlay, and debt service during a particular fiscal year. The annual budget must contain a complete itemization of all estimated expenditures and revenues and must be approved by the governing body prior to the beginning of the fiscal year.

The provision of funds in the budget does not create an obligation on the part of the Board to appropriate those sums during the year. Appropriations by official action of the Board of Supervisors are necessary before budgeted funds are available for expenditure. No amount may be budgeted unless the Board of Supervisors possesses legal authority to expend the funds, whether or not the appropriation is actually made. Thus, the Board of Supervisors may not adopt a budget that creates a deficit. The County budget must be balanced within all available operating revenues, including fund balance. The County's budget is considered balanced if projected revenues meet or exceed planned expenditures.

As a fiscal plan for County government, the budget serves several purposes. Through its budget, the Board of Supervisors not only indicates in a fairly precise way what it plans to do in providing services and facilities for the County in any given year, but it also provides a framework for the annual review of County policies and programs. In adopting a budget and making its appropriations, the Board is able to direct that all programs be coordinated in the total effort to supply local government services within the County.

At budget time and in the budget, the Board of Supervisors has an opportunity to indicate whether it intends to provide services and facilities at the current year level; whether these services should be increased, decreased or discontinued; and whether newly proposed programs should be adopted as proposed, modified or rejected. At budget time, the Board is also afforded an opportunity to obtain a long-range view of the County's needs, making systematic plans for those needs to be met in the current year's budget, and initiating plans for those needs to be met in subsequent years. Local governments, therefore, have a responsibility to develop an understandable budget.

Constraints on Budgetary Process

The Board of Supervisors may exercise only those powers either delegated to it by the General Assembly or reasonably implied from such delegation. State laws limit the Board's discretionary control over County spending, and the Board may not spend County funds for activities that are not directly authorized or reasonably implied by those laws. As a consequence, statutory authority must support each expenditure planned in the budget.

Certain expenditures are required by law and need to be anticipated in the County budget.

First, the Board must provide the County's share of the salaries of two of its elected officers: the Commissioner of the Revenue and the Treasurer. These officials, plus the Commonwealth's Attorney and Sheriff, perform state, as well as County functions. Specific salaries for the four positions are established in the annual appropriations act and are based primarily on a County's population and the duties of the office. The state pays a percent of the salaries, expenses and other allowances of the Commonwealth Attorney's (as fixed and determined by the State Compensation Board) and all of those costs of Sheriff's Offices that are approved and budgeted by the State Compensation Board. However, the state and the County each pay a portion of the salaries and expenses of the Treasurer and the Commissioner of the Revenue. In some instances specified by the Code, the salaries and expenses of these two offices are paid entirely by the Commonwealth. Counties budget and pay the full salaries of the constitutional officers and then receive periodic reimbursements from the state for their share.

Second, the Board of Supervisors has little discretion in making payments to service the debt of the County. The Board is required by law to make payments of interest and principal when they have matured and have become due. The Board is also required to make payments to meet the County's contractual obligations.

Third, counties are required to participate in supporting several programs mandated by state laws. For example, the 1971 Constitution and implementing statutes require the Board of Supervisors to provide funds to support public schools, to participate in the costs of certain social service programs, to provide for the enforcement of the statewide building code, and to share in operating costs of the state and local public health programs.

The Budgetary Process

Under all alternative forms of government and in virtually all traditionally organized counties with a County Administrator, the Chief Administrative Officer is responsible for preparing a County's budget and submitting it to the Board of Supervisors. In counties without a Chief Administrative Officer, responsibility for preparation of the budget rests with the Board. The common practice in these counties is for the Board to employ the County Clerk, Treasurer or some other qualified person inside or outside of the County government to prepare the budget. More and more counties have recognized the need for a County Chief Administrative Officer, who is responsible to the Board of Supervisors. The preparation of the annual budget is one of the most valuable demonstrations of such a need. A County Chief Administrator has a more detailed day-to-day knowledge of the County's current programs and future needs than a temporary employee, auditor or County officer experienced in only one area or function of County government.

The division superintendent prepares the school budget with the approval of the School Board after conducting a public hearing on the budget. The School Board submits it to the Board of Supervisors. In all cases, the Board of Supervisors makes the final local determination of the amounts to be expended, subject to the constraints discussed above.

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FY2025 Proposed Budget

Budget Estimates

All Virginia counties operate on a fiscal year that runs from July 1 to June 30. Budgeting for the ensuing fiscal year usually begins early in January when the Board of Supervisors issues a call for estimates of funds needed during the fiscal year to operate each department, board, office or agency of the County. In counties with large budgets, it is not unusual for estimate forms and instructions to be distributed as early as July of the current fiscal year. Planning for the ensuing fiscal year begins as soon as the current budget goes into effect. In these counties, budget orientation meetings and work sessions with department heads are held during late summer or fall.

Final Budget Consideration

Once the budget estimates for an ensuing fiscal year have been received from all departments, offices, agencies, and the County Administrator or other officer responsible for the budget has coordinated, reviewed and entered his or her recommendations for each estimate, the more formalized consideration of the annual budget is undertaken. At this point, the Board of Supervisors examines each source of revenue, the estimated amount of revenue each source is expected to produce, each expenditure estimate, and the County Administrator's recommendations for financing and maintaining the County's operation, programs, and projects. Decisions determining the amount to be included in the final draft of the budget are made by a series of votes by the Board members in public meetings. The power of the Board of Supervisors to grant or withhold funds is an important means by which it can determine general County policies and the level of services to be offered.

State law requires that the Board of Supervisors must approve the proposed expenditures in the budget and set the tax rates sufficient to fund them at the same time. Thus, once a final draft of the annual budget, including both revenue and expenditures, has been agreed upon by the Board, a brief synopsis of the budget must be prepared and advertised in a newspaper having general circulation in the County. If there is no newspaper of such general circulation in the County, then the Board of Supervisors may provide for notice by written or printed handbills posted at such places as it may direct. Along with the publication of a synopsis of the budget, notice must be provided of one or more public hearings scheduled before the Board of Supervisors. The hearing may be recessed or adjourned from day to day and entries are to be made in the Board's minute book of the notice and hearings. Every citizen of the County must be given the opportunity to be heard if he or she so desires.

Requirements for Public Hearings

Law with varying legal criteria applicable to the circumstances under which the County's budget is being considered prescribes the nature and timing of the public hearings. These requirements are as follows:

Budgets, Budget Amendments

- A brief synopsis of budget, except public school budget, which shall be for informative and fiscal planning purposes only, shall be published once; and notice given of one or more public hearings at least 7 days prior to date set for hearing.
- Hearing must be held at least 7 days prior to the approval of the budget.
- Amendments may be made to budget to adjust aggregate amount to be appropriated; however, any amendment which exceeds one percent (1%) of the expenditures shown must be advertised once at least 7 days prior to the meeting date.
- Notice shall state the intent to amend budget and include a brief synopsis of proposed budget amendment.

Tax Rate

- When any annual assessment, biennial assessment or general reassessment of real property would result in an increase of one percent or more in the total real property tax levied, notice must be given at least 30

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days before the date of the hearing by the publication of a notice in at least one newspaper of general circulation and a prominent public location at which notices are regularly posted in the County Administration building and shall follow below format:

- Notice shall be at least the size of 1/8 page of a standard size or tabloid size newspaper;
- Headline in the advertisement shall be in a type no smaller than 18-point; shall read “NOTICE OF PROPOSED REAL PROPERTY TAX INCREASE”; and
- Notice shall not be placed in that portion reserved for legal notices and classified advertisements.
- This public hearing shall not be held at the same time as the annual budget hearing
- Notice shall contain the following information (in addition to information Board of Supervisors may elect to include):
 - Assessment increase;
 - Lowered rate necessary to offset increased assessment;
 - Effective rate increase;
 - Proposed total budget increase; and
 - Date, time, and place of public hearing.
- The proposed increase shall be published at least seven days before the increased levy is made.

Copies of the complete proposed budget should be available for public examination before the hearings. It is also a good practice to schedule hearings so that time is available to incorporate in the budget the recommendations of the public if found acceptable. Time is also necessary for the County’s departments, offices and agencies to prepare for implementation of the adopted budget in County operations, programs and activities.

The School Budget

One decision that the Board of Supervisors must make about its annual budget is how it wishes to consider the school board’s budget in relation to the general government budget. Two laws relating to local governments provide different deadlines for the adoption of the annual budget. The first requires that the general government budget be approved no later than July 1 each year. (The last public hearing would have to be adjourned seven days prior to July 1). The second law requires that the School Board budget be adopted by May 1 of each year. (The last public hearing on the School Board budget would have to be adjourned seven days prior to May 1). As noted above, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction is required to provide each School Aid formula within 15 days following the final adjustment of the General Assembly. Should the State Superintendent fail to provide such an estimate with the 15-day limit, then the Board of Supervisors must approve the School Board’s budget within 30 days of the receipt of the estimate.

The Board of Supervisors must decide whether it wishes to consider the general government budget in conjunction with the School Board budget and at one time to approve the whole (i.e., general government and School Board) budget, in which case one combined advertisement of notice and public hearing will suffice. Alternatively, the Board of Supervisors may consider the School Board budget separately and approve it by May 1 with the accompanying advertisement of notice and public hearing followed later by approval of the general government budget and a second separate advertisement of notice and public hearing. If attempts are made to approve both the School Board and the general government budgets by May 1, it may be necessary for the Board of Supervisors and the County Administrator to receive the estimates of the general government department offices and agencies before the legal deadline of April 1. With either allowance, compliance is difficult.

Budget Adoption

When the required public hearings have been completed and the final figures agreed upon have been entered, the annual budget is considered completed and ready for adoption. The constitution requires that any resolution or ordinance imposing taxes of more than \$500 can be adopted only by a majority of all members elected to the

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Board of Supervisors. The voting procedure to be followed in adopting the budget is that used in the adoption of any other ordinance that requires a recorded vote once the majority vote is obtained. The budget is considered adopted. It then becomes the official County plan of expenditures and revenues for the ensuing fiscal year and establishes the expenditure limits for all County, departments, offices and agencies during the same period.

STAFFORD COUNTY BUDGET GUIDELINES

Formulation of the County Administrator's Proposed Budget

The County Administrator proposes the incremental budget to the Board of Supervisors in February. The departments, boards, commissions, and agencies are participants in this process, which begins in the fall of the preceding year with the submission of a budget calendar to the Board of Supervisors by the Budget Office. That calendar establishes dates in the budget process, such as Board of Supervisors budget work sessions and public hearings that lead to final adoption of the budget. Budget requests are based on the Budget Preparation Manual instructions. Each request must clearly relate to the organization's program objectives. Due to resource constraints, departments are encouraged to develop proposals to trade or shift resources, rather than seek significant additional funds.

Board of Supervisor's Authorization and Appropriation

The Board can delete or change programs and/or dollar allocations in the County Administrator's proposed budget. The Board can only increase or decrease funding for the education budget, in total or at the state defined category level. The School Budget must be adopted by May 1st as prescribed by Section 22.1-93 of the Code of Virginia (1950), as amended. Stafford's Budget must be adopted and all appropriations approved by July 1st.

Budget Implementation

Once the budget is adopted, it becomes the legal basis for the programs of each department during the fiscal year. No department or other agency of Stafford's government may spend in excess of approved and appropriated amounts. Financial and programmatic monitoring of departmental activities to ensure conformity with the adopted budget takes place throughout the year. Copies of the proposed and adopted budgets are available for review on the County's website at <http://www.staffordcountyva.gov/>, in the County Administrator's Office, and in the Budget Office. Printed or electronic copies may be purchased from the Budget Office. (A charge is levied to defray costs).

County Administrator's Authorization

The County Administrator is authorized to transfer budgeted funds within the categories as appropriated. The Board of Supervisors must approve any revisions that alter Stafford's total budgeted expenditures.

Amendment of the Budget

As prescribed by Section 15.2-2507 of the Code of Virginia (1950), as amended, the budget can be amended as required throughout the fiscal year. However, any such amendment which exceeds one percent of the total expenditures shown in the currently adopted budget must be accomplished by publishing a notice of a meeting and a public hearing once in a newspaper having general circulation in that locality at least seven days prior to the meeting date. The notice shall state the County's intent to amend the budget and include a brief synopsis of the proposed budget amendment. The governing body may adopt such amendment at the advertised meeting, after first providing a public hearing on the proposed budget amendments.

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Audit

Stafford's financial records are audited each fiscal year by a firm of independent certified public accountants in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards; the standards applicable to financial audits contained in *Government Auditing Standards*, issued by the Comptroller General of the United States; and *Specifications for Audits of Counties, Cities and Towns*, issued by the Auditor of Public Accounts of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Those standards and specifications require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements are free of material misstatement. An audit includes examining, on a test basis, evidence supporting the amounts, and disclosures in the financial statements. An audit also includes assessing the accounting principles used and significant estimates made by management, as well as evaluating the overall financial statement presentation.

Basis of Accounting

The basis of accounting determines when transactions should be recognized for financial statements.

The accounting and financial reporting treatment applied to a fund is determined by its measurement focus.

Governmental funds utilize the *modified accrual basis of accounting* under which revenues and related assets are recorded when measurable and available to finance operations during the year. Accordingly, real and personal property taxes are recorded as revenues and receivables when billed, net of allowances for uncollectible amounts. Property taxes due before June 30, but not collected within 45 days after fiscal year end are reflected as deferred revenues. Sales taxes collected and held by the State at year-end on behalf of the County are recognized as revenue. The County considers all revenues reported in the governmental funds to be available if the revenues are collected within 75 days after year-end. Certain other intergovernmental revenues and sales and services, other than utility customer receivables, are not susceptible to accrual. Expenditure-driven grants are recognized as revenue when the qualifying expenditures have been incurred and all other grant requirements have been satisfied. Licenses, permits, fines, and rents are recorded as revenue when received. General purpose entitlement revenues are recognized in the period to which the entitlement applies.

The proprietary fund and the private purpose trust funds are accounted for on a flow of economic resources measurement focus. The statements of net assets, statements of activities, financial statements of the Proprietary and Fiduciary Funds are presented on the *accrual basis of accounting*. Under this method of accounting, revenues are recognized when earned and expenses are recorded when liabilities are incurred without regard to receipt or disbursement of cash.

Basis of Budgeting

The basis of budgeting determines when revenues and expenditures are recognized for budgetary purposes.

For the most part, the County's budget follows the same basis of accounting used in preparing the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR), which is prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting practices (GAAP). Budgets for proprietary funds are adopted in accordance with GAAP with the exception that the budget recognizes the flow of funds. Payment of debt principal is included in the budget, but depreciation is not.