

# Hennepin County Board approves 4.75% maximum property tax levy increase

Commissioners also agree to raise salaries for sheriff and county attorney.

By David Chanen (<http://www.startribune.com/david-chanen/10644586/>) Star Tribune |

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The Hennepin County Board on Tuesday approved a maximum 4.75% property tax levy increase for 2020, but not before one commissioner attempted to raise that figure to add funding for the county's human services department.

The board also awarded salary bumps to County Attorney Mike Freeman and Sheriff Dave Hutchinson, action that it had tabled for nearly a year. Those jobs are the county's only elected positions aside from the County Board itself.

Next year's proposed budget comes in at \$2.5 billion, about \$90 million more than this year's spending plan. If approved in December, the 4.75% levy increase would add \$30 million to the proposed 2020 budget. Officials said the higher levy would fund ongoing needs in child protection, personnel expenses and improvements to the county's service centers.

If the board approves the levy hike of 4.75% — it can decide to go lower than that, but no higher — the owner of a median-valued \$281,000 home would pay about \$60 more next year in county property taxes. The owner of a home valued over \$1 million would pay about \$230 more next year.

For most of the last decade, the Hennepin board has increased the property tax levy. The board raised this year's levy by 5.25%, and property taxes paid for one-third of the county budget.

Commissioner Jeff Johnson, a frequent opponent of tax hikes, said the levy is too high and that county residents already pay too much in taxes.

"The past 6 or 7 years have seen an average levy increase of about 5 percent, which is way above the rate of inflation," he said. "This is on top of potential taxes from cities, school and watershed districts and the state. I was afraid years ago this was going to be a trend."

Before the levy vote, Commissioner Angela Conley proposed a 5.75% property tax levy increase that would have added \$8 million more to the budget. She said it was necessary because human services cash balance has dropped by more than \$100 million since 2015.

"The budget is down to a crisis level," she said. "We've seen expanded caseloads because of people with mental health issues, opioid addiction, homelessness and child protection needs. There has been a gradual divestment, and it's impacting the people we serve."

Several commissioners spoke against Conley's proposal before rejecting it on a 5-2 vote. Debbie Goettel said the county was in a quagmire because many of the people who seek county services also pay taxes to help cover the costs.

Commissioners Johnson, Mike Opat, and Jan Callison also argued that Conley's higher levy was inappropriate. They said the larger issue was that the county consistently receives less state and federal funding. Commissioner Irene Fernando voted for the increase.

Conley disagreed. "Wages have stagnated and rents are through the roof," she said. "We don't have the capacity to help the homeless and people with mental illness. I heard services are in dire straits. We are doing more with less. I want a plan on how we will repurpose dollars to address the issues."

The board voted 6-1 to grant raises to Freeman and Hutchinson, a year after it had declined to take similar action. It gave Freeman and Hutchinson a 2.5% raise from now through the end of the year and for all of 2020, and a 2% raise in 2021.

By 2021, Freeman will make \$195,065 a year and Hutchinson, \$188,775. Fernando voted against the raise because she believed the two salaries should be equal, but Opat said the discrepancy was due to the fact that the sheriff has full-time use of a vehicle and a free



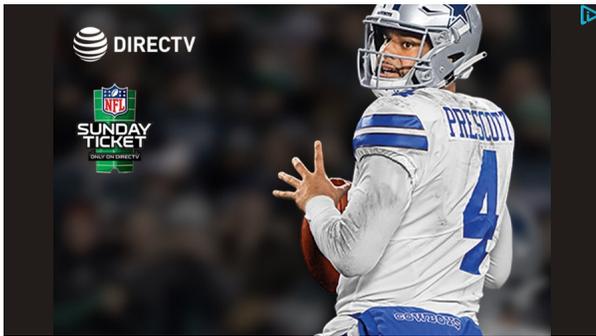
STAR TRIBUNE FILE PHOTOS

The Hennepin County Board had tabled for nearly a year action on salary bumps for County Attorney Mike Freeman and Sheriff

uniform allowance.

**David Chanen** is a reporter covering Hennepin County government and Prince's estate dealings. He previously covered crime, courts and spent two sessions at the Legislature.

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