

COUNTY

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“Because of the nature of our board and the way things work because we’re such a small county, we kind of thought that if we went that way, we’d have to have somebody kind of watching all the time,” Ihrke said. “But the committee decided that sounded like just too crazy of a way to go — just so much to have to manage, really. Even from the county board member side, it would have to be watched all the time.”

Enrolling the three farms into CRP, which is overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm Service Agency, and IRAP, which is administered by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, would not only bring the county into compliance with state statute but would bring in revenue, too — perhaps even an amount similar to what the farms bring in today, an average of about \$200 per acre, according to Ihrke.

CRP would pay a yearly rental payment in exchange for the land being removed from agricultural production and species planted there to improve the land’s environmental quality. Contracts for land enrolled in CRP range from 10 to 15 years in length, providing a consistent and reliable source of revenue, Ihrke added.

“We’d probably go with the 10-year first and see how things go,” Ihrke said.

The county would also receive a small fee per acre from

the IDNR through IRAP, typically about \$3 or \$4 per acre.

Meanwhile, the costs would be minimal, Ihrke noted, with the IDNR coordinating the hunting activities, providing insurance and helping with management of the pasture.

“There could be a small cost for seeding and ground prep, but right now, it sounds like we have some nonprofit groups in our county that would be willing to take on those projects, like Pheasants Forever and the Grand Prairie Friends,” Ihrke said, mentioning a couple of the groups that have expressed interest in helping design and implement the conservation projects. “The nonprofit groups are willing to help maintain everything, as well, so it should be pretty low-maintenance for the county.”

Ihrke said the farmland would end up essentially being a public park, open for public use by obtaining a permit, she said.

“We could even get the three school districts (in Ford County) involved with maybe their science classes or the FFA program or ag classes,” Ihrke said. “They’d be able to participate in helping plan and manage the grounds. That would be an example of a public benefit, right?”

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources would require permits for the public use of the grounds. For hunting, specifically, a lottery would be held to determine which hunters are permitted to use it each season, Ihrke said, while one-day permits, for example, could be

issued for other activities, such as hiking and birdwatching.

Because it could take some time to enroll the farmland in CRP and IRAP and the county still needs to generate revenue from the property, the county board is considering renting out the three farms for the next year under proposed one-year cash-rent lease agreements that would be the focus of a to-be-scheduled public auction, then taking the land out of agricultural production once those one-year leases expire next year. The board is expected in December to decide whether to schedule the auction for the abbreviated leases, set a term length for the leases and authorize the overview committee’s chairman to have the farmland’s soil tested in preparation for the auction.

“Basically, it would just be so that land is not sitting there for a year with nothing happening,” Ihrke said. “That would be why we would lease it (for another year), but the full board still has to decide what direction they want to take.”

Not included in the proposed abbreviated leases would be 31 acres of pasture at the Hatfield/Bowen Farm, Ihrke noted, since the county is expected to soon lease that land for the next 10 years to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for a proposed prairie restoration project. If that lease is approved, the agency would restore the prairie there to a high-quality wildlife habitat and then work with the IDNR to enroll that acreage into IRAP.

The board is expected to vote on approval of the lease with the

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service next month.

“That will go through regardless (of whether the rest of the farmland continues to be rented out for the next year),” Ihrke said, “because that 31 acres is basically not farmable ground, and this will give us the option, again, for the public to access the land eventually.”

Absent from last week’s board meeting were members Chase McCall, Dr. Bernadette Ray and Randy Ferguson, all of Gibson City, and Tim Nuss of rural Roberts.

Other business

Also at last week’s board meeting:

■ The board approved the county’s budget for the 2023 fiscal year, which begins Dec. 1. The budget shows projected revenue of \$5,082,926 and expenses of \$5,088,494, according to County Clerk & Recorder Amy Frederick.

■ Frederick presented certificates of service to retiring Ford County Sheriff Mark Doran of Gibson City, who is leaving the position on Dec. 1 after 16 years, and outgoing board member Jason Johnson of rural Paxton, who did not seek re-election after serving on the board since March 2011. Meanwhile, a certificate will be mailed to Ray, who also did not seek re-election.

■ The board heard from Doran about potentially financing the purchase of body cameras for sheriff’s deputies.

■ The board approved the creation of a Ford County

Jury Commission as requested by Circuit Judge Matt Fitton. Three people will be selected by the judge to serve as jury commissioners, each serving terms ranging from one to three years.

■ The board voted 4-4 on a proposal to raise the circuit clerk’s salary to \$60,000. The proposal is expected to be revisited in December. Voting “no” were board members Lesley King of Piper City, Tom McQuinn of rural Paxton, Chuck Aubry of Gibson City and Ann Ihrke of rural Buckley.

■ The board approved a calendar of board meetings for the 2022-23 fiscal year, with regular meetings set for 7 p.m. on the following Mondays: Dec. 12, Jan. 9, Feb. 13, March 13, April 17, May 8, June 12, July 10, Aug. 14, Sept. 11, Oct. 9 and Nov. 13.

■ The board’s organizational meeting was set for 4 p.m. Monday, Dec. 5, in the basement of the sheriff’s office in Paxton.

■ The board approved a schedule of paid holidays for courthouse employees, showing paid days off on Dec. 26, Jan. 2, Jan. 16, Feb. 3, Feb. 20, May 29, June 19, July 4, Sept. 4, Oct. 9, Nov. 10, Nov. 23 and Nov. 24.

■ The board approved the extension of the county board’s lease with the Ford County Public Building Commission and approved levying \$238,917 in property taxes on behalf of the commission.

■ The board set a truth-in-taxation hearing for 6:30 p.m. Dec. 12 regarding the county’s tax levy for 2022.

■ The board discussed the need to eventually replace the county clerk and recorder’s office’s aging election equipment. While there were no issues with the equipment on Election Day, the equipment — which includes nearly 50 voting machines — is 20-plus years old, Frederick said. No immediate action was taken.

■ The board approved the sale of two properties — one in Rogers Township and the other in Paxton — that were acquired by the county after their taxes went unpaid.

■ The board approved inter-agency dispatch agreements between the sheriff’s office and the cities of Paxton and Gibson City and Gibson Area Ambulance Service, plus contracts between the sheriff’s office and villages of Elliott and Melvin.

■ The board approved extending the moratorium on the approval of special-use permits for solar farms for 60 more days.

■ The board voted 6-2, with Jason Johnson of rural Paxton and Chuck Aubry of Gibson City in dissent, to approve raising the salary of Zoning Enforcement Officer Brandon Magers to \$16,000.

■ The board heard the monthly report from Circuit Clerk Kamalen Johnson Anderson.

■ The board approved joining the Virtual Local Area Network (VLAN).

■ The board unanimously improved a new longevity schedule for employees.

■ The board approved salary raises for probation officers.

MULTIPLIER

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“Stuff’s been selling for quite a bit more, and the assessments got behind and were not keeping up,” Yergler said. “So that results in a high equalization factor for pretty much everybody across the county.”

The intent of applying the equalization factor, Yergler said, is to raise properties’ assessed values throughout the county so that they are uniformly correct — equal to one-third of their market values as statutorily required, Yergler said.

Yergler understands taxpayers will not be happy with the news.

“Unfortunately, it’s just the real estate market right now,” Yergler said. “We went through a stretch from 2007 to 2012 when we had negative multipliers because there were a lot of foreclosures and values dropped, ... but right now the real estate market’s really strong and you’re seeing the effects of that.”

Yergler said the equalization factor varies by township. It is 17 percent for most of the county’s townships but is higher in some — 24 percent in Ashkum, Chebanse and Milks Grove townships in the northern part of the county — and lower in others — 10 percent in Belmont and 3 percent in Middleport in the Watseka area, where the real estate market is still recovering from the city’s flooding issues.

In accordance with the Property Tax Code, a public notice to taxpayers in Artesia and Loda townships in the Loda and Buckley areas was published in the Nov. 16 edition of the Ford County Chronicle, listing each parcel whose assessed value was changed for 2022.

Yergler said he has already sent in the new equalization figures to the Illinois Department of Revenue, which is expected to issue a tentative multiplier after confirming Yergler’s calculations. Yergler said he expects the tentative multiplier to be released “in the next 30 days.” The tentative multiplier will be a 1.000 if Yergler’s calculations were correct, lower than 1.000 if they were too high and higher than 1.000 if they were too low, he said.

In the meantime, Iroquois County property owners can appeal their new assessments to the Iroquois County Board of Review until Thursday, Dec. 22. Appeal forms are available in the assessor’s office in the Administrative Center at 1001 E. Grant St. in Watseka. For more information about the appeal process, taxpayers can contact Yergler at 815-432-6985.

“People are encouraged to look at their assessment,” Yergler said. “They should take their assessment and multiply it times three and then ask themselves one question: Would they sell their house for that amount?”

While the equalization factor permanently increases properties’ assessed values, exempt from paying any resulting in-

crease in taxes are people over age 65 who have a senior exemption and senior freeze and who also still live on the property they own, Yergler said.

“That protects them from those increases,” Yergler said.

As for those taxpayers who could end up paying more in taxes as a result of the equalization factor, Yergler noted that the amount will vary depending on the tax levies set this fall by their local taxing bodies. Yergler also noted that it remains possible that some taxing bodies could decide to reduce their levies for 2022, resulting in a smaller increase or even no increase for taxpayers.

“Maybe they won’t have to levy the full amount,” Yergler said, as a result of having a larger equalized assessed valuation (EAV).

Yergler admitted that he has not seen that trend so far this fall, though.

“Taxing bodies are taking the cash (available to them) while the homeowners and the farmers are still getting hit,” Yergler said. “Unfortunately, that’s the system that Illinois has — the property tax system — to fund everything, and that’s not going to change anytime soon, as far as I can see.”

Yergler said he hopes higher interest rates eventually will help stabilize the real estate market.

“People are just paying crazy amounts of money for homes,” Yergler said, “and until that changes, this will be the net result of that.”

On Nov. 22, Loda Township Assessor Jim Shearl presented a written report on the situation to the Loda Township Board. In a subsequent statement released to the Ford County Chronicle, Shearl said he was disappointed by the assessment increase.

“We have just had an increase in recent years,” said Shearl, in his first year as township assessor. “While it was not as high as this one, such notices always leave people frustrated.”

In his written report to the board, Shearl encouraged Loda Township residential landowners to consider appealing their assessments if they feel their assessments are too high. Shearl said he would be available to assist them with the process.

“I can assist property owners if they wish,” Shearl said.

Equalization is done annually in Iroquois County as required by state law. As a long-term solution to managing the process, Shearl suggested the county acquire a computer-assisted mass-appraisal (CAMA) software system that would allow for “computer-generated equalization” as property sales are tracked.

“To put such a system in place in Iroquois County would cost more than \$1.4 million,” Shearl said in his written report. “It seems like it is time to get such a system for our county.”

In addition to helping people with their appeals, Shearl said he plans to “stay on task” assessing “all properties” in Loda Township every four years.

STATE’S UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE TRUST FUND

Plan to pay down remaining unemployment debt announced

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SPRINGFIELD — Lawmakers on Tuesday announced a bipartisan plan to use state revenues to pay down the remaining \$1.4 billion in debt taken on by the state’s Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part of the agreement is expected to move through the General Assembly this week before lawmakers adjourn for the year. It would increase an employee’s “taxable wage base” — which is the amount of an employee’s wages for which an employer must pay unemployment taxes — by 2.4 percent for each of the next five years. It would also increase the target balance of the fund’s reserves from \$1 billion to \$1.75 billion.

It does not decrease the number of weeks or maximum

amounts of benefits an unemployed person can receive.

“This bipartisan agreement eliminates the final portion of the \$4.5 billion of debt forced upon our state during the pandemic,” Gov. J.B. Pritzker said at a news conference Tuesday in his Capitol office. “It will save Illinois businesses hundreds of millions of dollars over the next decade, and it will save taxpayers \$20 million in interest costs that would otherwise have been due next September.”

A \$1.8 billion state cash appropriation — the funding backbone of the bipartisan agreement between business and labor — would be included in a supplemental funding plan to spend the current year’s anticipated budget surplus. That action won’t come until some time next year as lawmakers look to spend an estimated surplus of about \$2.9 billion for the current fiscal year, which ends June 30,

2023.

It’s the final step in paying down approximately \$4.5 billion in debt to the federal government that the state’s unemployment trust fund incurred since 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic and associated stay-at-home orders shut down the state’s economy and sent unemployment rates skyrocketing. Previous legislative actions included a \$2.7 billion infusion of federal American Rescue Plan Act funding and a \$450 million deposit from recent unemployment trust fund revenues.

Pritzker was flanked by several Republicans, including Sen. Sue Rezin, R-Morris, who has been a Senate unemployment negotiator for 12 years. She said the stability the bill offers is important for businesses and those claiming unemployment.

“So, you know, all in all, we understand that some people

may not like this, but considering where we were, in unprecedented times after the pandemic, this is a good bill,” Rezin said. “The majority of the states went through this entire process as well.”

Business and labor groups also praised the plan which was born from months of negotiations.

“Not only will this proposed legislation wipe out the existing debt caused by the pandemic, it also provides structural unemployment insurance funding reforms that will provide greater solvency for the trust fund now and in the future,” Pat Devaney, secretary treasurer of the AFL/CIO labor organization and a lead labor negotiator on the bill, said at the news conference.

The unemployment trust fund is generally funded by the state’s businesses through insurance premiums collected via payroll taxes.

GCMS

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Superintendent Jeremy Darnell:

— An increase in the district’s equalized assessed valuation (EAV), bolstered by an additional \$16 million in taxable property resulting from the construction of the Ford County Wind Farm in Sullivant, Drummer and Dix townships in late 2021 and early 2022. The wind farm alone is expected to bring in an estimated \$600,000 in new revenue.

— And what Darnell expects will be a sustained increase in corporate personal property replacement tax (CPPRT) revenue.

With the additional revenues, the tax rate for the district’s educational fund is expected to be reduced to \$3.50 per \$100 of assessed valuation, down from the maximum rate of \$3.60 that has been in place for nearly two decades, Darnell said. Overall, the tax rate is expected to fall by 15 to 18 cents from its current rate of \$5.57 per \$100 of assessed valuation.

Just six years ago — in 2016 — the overall tax rate was \$6.43.

“I can’t find a time where the ed fund was not maxed out in the historical documents I have, so it’s kind of a big deal,” Darnell said Tuesday after the school board approved the district’s 2022 tax levy Monday night.

The levy, unchanged from a tentative version approved a month earlier, calls for \$9.08 million to be collected next summer from landowners in Ford, Champaign, Livingston and McLean counties, including \$6.28 million to be levied for the educational fund.

The levy is based on a budget for the fiscal year that ends June

30, 2023, that shows a \$1.3 million deficit — with a projected \$2.5 million in revenue and \$3.815 million in expenses — although Darnell noted when the budget was approved in September that the numbers could change, especially in regards to CPPRT revenue. While a conservative estimate of \$1 million in CPPRT revenue was budgeted, Darnell said that number likely will go up, noting the district received \$1.7 million last year. Even if that revenue figure does not rise, the district has healthy fund balances totaling \$13.9 million — far more than enough to cover the financial loss, Darnell added.

The budget includes expenses for several big-ticket projects, including the construction of a new maintenance shed for a cost of \$675,000 and new greenhouse for a cost of \$350,000.

On Monday night, the school board approved a contract with BLDD Architects Inc. of Decatur for the design of the proposed 30-by-48-foot greenhouse and for the execution of the bidding process. The board also approved a final payment of \$353,405 to Blunier Builders Inc. of Washington, Ill., for the construction of the 60-by-160-foot maintenance shed, which is already under way and is expected to be finished by January.

The greenhouse will be built directly north of GCMS High School, across from the ag shop, Darnell said. It will be built on land the district owns off of 16th Street that once contained an unoccupied home — which was eventually torn down — and still contains a garage that the district has been using for the storage of its lawnmowers and driver’s education vehicle, Darnell said.

The greenhouse project includes the demolition of the garage and the construction of

sidewalks along the perimeter of the new structure, Darnell said. The garage’s existing contents will be moved to the new maintenance shed, which is being built across from the high school’s athletic complex on 15th Street, Darnell said.

“We’ll put it out for bid in January,” Darnell said of the greenhouse project. “It’ll look like a high-scale greenhouse that you might see at a state university. ... It’s going to look really nice.”

Other business

Also at Monday’s school board meeting:

■ The board approved Jake Barnes and Cassidi Nuckols serving as volunteer coaches for boys’ and girls’ basketball, respectively, for the 2022-23 season.

■ The board voted to accept the retirement of Robert Ehmen as a custodian, effective Dec. 31.

■ The board approved the hiring of Rachel Denault as an elementary school teacher for the 2022-23 school year and Taylor Spiker as a special education teacher at GCMS High School starting Jan. 3.

■ The board approved a custodial compensation package that raises the starting pay rate for custodians employed by the district from \$15 per hour to \$18 per hour. Darnell said the idea behind the increase in base pay is to attract quality candidates. With Ehmen’s upcoming retirement, the district will have two vacant custodian positions, as it already has one, Darnell said. Candidates are currently being sought.

■ The board approved the purchase of a utility-terrain vehicle (UTV) and plow for \$22,961 from Birkey’s Farm Store in Gibson City. The UTV is a 2023 Kubota RTV X1100.

■ Following a public hearing on the district’s updated e-learning plan, the board approved the plan. School districts are required to review their e-learning plans every three years. Having an e-learning plan allows school districts to use so-called e-learning days in the event that in-person classes cannot be held. E-learning days allow students to continue to learn — albeit remotely from home — even when in-person attendance is not available.

■ The board approved a calendar of board meetings for 2023, showing most meetings to be held on the fourth Monday of the month. In a couple of instances, the meeting will be on the third Monday of the month, Darnell said. All meetings begin at 6:15 p.m. in the board room in the unit office at 307 N. Sangamon Ave. in Gibson City. Meetings were scheduled for: Jan. 30, Feb. 27, March 27, April 24, May 22, June 26, July 24, Aug. 28, Sept. 25, Oct. 23, Nov. 27 and Dec. 18.

■ The board approved field trips for the Interact Club on Nov. 30 to Aurora, the foods class on Dec. 14-15 to County Market in Gibson City and the Art 4 class on Dec. 9 to Chicago’s Art District and Museum of Modern Art.

■ The board approved the destruction of audio recordings of closed meetings dating through the end of May 2021.

■ The board voted to accept three donations from the First Presbyterian Church — including a \$500 donation for the GCMS High School choir program, a \$5,685 donation for the purchase of three automated external defibrillators and a \$5,400 donation for elementary school snacks — along with a \$2,725 donation from Don Unzicker memorials for the GCMS/Fisher high school wrestling program.