

Bexar County boosts spending, cuts tax rate

By [Zeke MacCormack](#)
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Bexar County commissioners on Tuesday lowered the county tax rate by nearly a half-cent and approved a \$1.76 billion budget for 2017-18 after making numerous amendments that boosted spending by \$9 million.

Public praise greeted last-minute decisions to raise the minimum pay for county workers to \$14.25 an hour, to underwrite the restoration of a local conjunto landmark and to create a program to help military personnel transition into civilian life.

“I think we’ve got a very good budget this year,” said County Judge Nelson Wolff before the unanimous votes to adopt the budget and tax rate. “I’m real proud of the work we’ve done.”

The budget developed by County Manager David Smith calls for overall county spending to increase nearly \$48 million over the current bottom line of \$1.72 billion.

It includes \$563 million for operating expenditures, \$807 million for roads, floods and capital projects, \$141 million for debt service, \$18 million for contingencies, and a carryover/reserve balance of \$231 million.

General fund expenditures will be \$461.55 million in the new fiscal year that begins Oct. 1, up from \$430.34 million in the current budget.

The spending plan includes funding for 94 new positions on the county payroll, taking it to more than 4,700 workers, including 14 authorized in the amendments Tuesday.



County Judge Nelson Wolff smiles during a new conference in July. Tuesday, Bexar County Commissioners Court, headed by Wolff, approved cutting the tax rate by nearly half a cent even as they increased the budget to include more services for veterans and raises for employees. Photo: Robin Jerstad/San Antonio Express News

The new tax rate is 30.4097 cents per \$100 property value, compared with the current levy of 30.8950 cents.

The adopted rate is 5 percent higher than the effective tax rate of 29.9816 cents, which is the levy needed to generate the same amount of tax revenue raised in county taxes this year given changes in property values.

Since the net value of all taxable property in the county climbed 8 percent, to \$150.9 billion, many local homeowners will see their county tax bill increase despite the tax rate reduction. Commissioner Paul Elizondo stressed that it's climbing property appraisals that are fueling any higher county tax bills, noting this marks the 23rd consecutive year that commissioners have kept the county rate unchanged or reduced it.

"I just want to make sure word gets out there," he said.

Commissioner Tommy Calvert laid much of the blame for escalating tax bills on the Legislature, saying, "You want real relief? You've got to get your legislators in line."

The budget changes, resulting from deliberations at recent workshops, included allocating \$250,000 for a new community veterans transition organization.

"We're hoping it's a game-changer and can become a model," said Commissioner Kevin Wolff, identifying the program's goal as helping departing military members line up housing, jobs and continuing education.

Commissioners originally planned to boost employees' base pay from \$13.75 to \$14 an hour. But on Tuesday they set the new minimum at \$14.25, a change that also triggers raises for other employees and required an additional \$1.46 million in spending.

"We believe the county can do as well, or better than, the city," said Molly Martinez of COPS/Metro Alliance during a public hearing Tuesday on the budget, noting San Antonio raised its starting pay from \$13.75 to \$14.25 in its new budget.

Nelson Wolff responded, "I hope you will remember the city drug its feet ... They kind of fought it, but they came along."

Other budget changes approved Tuesday included allocating \$3.36 million for raises to managers, directors and other professional-level employees, and \$1.54 million more for pay increases to ensure all workers see at least a 3 percent salary increase. Commissioners also allocated \$680,000 for retiree cost-of-living pension increases.

Following the city's lead again, commissioners allocated \$500,000 to help restore the historic North Zarzamora Street building that housed Lerma's Nite Club from 1951 to 2010, when it closed.

"We're thankful the county is helping preserve this building by matching the city money," said Susana Segura, project manager for the Esperanza Center for Peace and Justice, which hopes to reopen the site as a community cultural center and BiblioTech branch.

Calvert joined other officials in applauding the teamwork shown in crafting the budget, particularly during these "very difficult times," fiscally speaking.

He cited the jail as "a pull" on county resources.

The Sheriff's Office adult detention center budget is \$62 million, including \$4 million to cover the cost of housing prisoners in other counties, if necessary, because of overcrowding at the county jail.

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