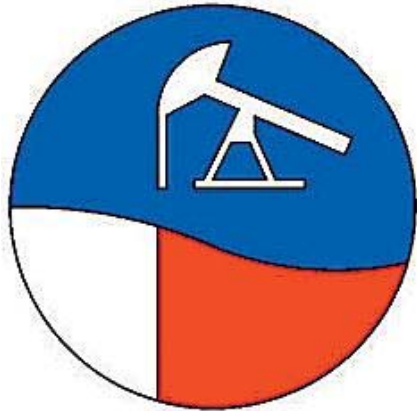




County budget workshop concludes

BY GEOFF FOLSOM

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On the last day of their fiscal year 2010-2011 budget workshop, Ector County commissioners voted to allow a company to set up a series of programs to help employees get healthier.

Commissioners voted 4-1, with Greg Simmons opposing, to authorize \$25,000 of the budget to go toward a program set up by [CareHere](#), a Tennessee company that operates the county's employee wellness center.

Betsy D'Acierno, CareHere's director of operations in Texas, said a smoking-cessation program would be instituted around Oct. 1. It will offer instructions on quitting smoking, as well as access to drugs like Chantix, which employees will have to pay for.

D'Acierno said the smoking program, when done in a clinical setting, has a success rate of between 80 and 85 percent. It also works for smokeless tobacco.

"It's really about the peer support and getting people the right tools at the right time," she said.

More programs will be added in the coming months, she said.

"The more comprehensive we can make it for our folks, the more successful it will be," she said.

Future plans include programs for assistance with proper nutrition, pregnancy and mental health care.

"We need that," County Judge Susan Redford said.

Commissioner Dale Childers said the program was a good investment.

"It saves money," he said. "If our employees are healthy, they'll probably be more productive."

But with uncertainty over the impact of federal health care legislation, Simmons said now isn't the time to be adding a program.

"You're adding on a whole new cost to something we don't know how much is going to cost us yet," he said.

While they won't vote on a final budget until Sept. 13, commissioners discussed the possible tax rate later in the meeting. Redford had proposed a rate of 35.8 cents per \$100 property tax valuation.

Simmons said he was concerned that, despite the tax rate staying the same, the amount of taxes residents pay could increase by between 3 and 7 percent.

Redford acknowledged the final rate would likely be higher than the effective rate, which would keep tax revenue the same as the current year, but below the rollback rate, which would require voter approval.

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