

## **THE LOWDOWN**

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

In early May, county manager Bonnie Hammersley released her recommended budget for the upcoming fiscal year, only a few weeks after she announced her plans to retire effective July 31, 2024. Chief among Bonnie's many accomplishments during her time here in Orange County is her approach to the budget. She introduced a process for wrestling with this enormous task that I believe will remain as her most profound legacy. Personally, I am glad she will lead us through the budget adoption process one more time before she concludes her service.

Bonnie started working for Orange County in the summer of 2014. At that time, I was actively running my first campaign. I had been involved in the budgetary process while serving under the former sheriff, and I think it is fair to say the county's system at the time was complex and convoluted. I worked to understand different concepts, such as a zero-based budget versus a balanced one, and I worried about the process, which felt exceedingly daunting. Once elected in November, I met with the county manager. The very first thing Bonnie told me was not to worry about the budget. She promised the process would be simplified and it would work better. She was correct, and I've never been more grateful.

State law requires county managers to present a balanced budget each year. I frequently spend time with North Carolina's other 99 sheriffs, and when I hear their nightmarish budget stories, I am so appreciative of Bonnie's leadership and the guidance of the wonderful team in finance.

But for the difference in scale, county and household budgets resemble each other. When designing a budget, it is important to first determine income sources and fixed expenses. Next, emergencies and unexpected costs should be anticipated before ultimately charting a spending plan for the year that prioritizes needs while still allowing room to accommodate values-based decisions regarding any wants. Guiding principles for drafting a budget, whether public or personal, should include reasonableness and achievability.

Bonnie and deputy county manager Travis Myren brought a new process to Orange County. Instead of each department submitting their own budget requests for consideration, management organized us into functional leadership teams, such as Education, General Government, and Human Services, where departments with thematically similar missions collaborated. Along with Emergency Services, the

Criminal Justice Resource Department, and the courts, the Sheriff's Office became part of the Public Safety group.

Each department examined its desired programs, equipment requirements, interesting projects, and training needs, and selected its top five priorities for the year. These priorities formed the Public Safety master list. As a team, we then ranked items on the list, selecting the top three from each group of five. If a particular item on my list was also valued by other departments in the group, we ranked it highly.

Essentially, we were collaborating to vet each department's budget request and forward it with the support and approval of the Public Safety team. In this manner, we focused on the needs, narrowed the list of wants, and presented a mutually agreed upon priority list to the manager.

Bonnie and Travis would then search for cost-effective ways to meet the identified needs. At every step, the process sought to get the best bang for the taxpayers' buck and be a good steward of the funds entrusted to Orange County government. Meanwhile, the manager repeated this process with other functional leadership teams, eventually combining requests into a balanced budget which she recommended for adoption to the Board of County Commissioners. The Commissioners would then meet with each department to fine tune the budget, working from a set of priorities and numbers that reflected consideration, discussion, ranking, and trimming by knowledgeable people. This process, like many other things, morphed somewhat during the pandemic, but the tenets of it still guide us today.

The thought that the Sheriff or any department head can financially run amuck is far-fetched. It is entertaining at best and dangerous at worst. With Bonnie's guidance, we participated in a process that looked outward, not inward, and started with dedication to serving residents and exercising fiscal responsibility.

It is no secret that I want to lead a premier agency, progressive in the way we think, work, and train. I am grateful to Bonnie and her team for helping me accomplish these goals within a budget that has been vetted by my peers, supported by the manager, and approved by the commissioners.

I wish Bonnie Hammersley well in her retirement and future adventures, and I thank her for making the budget process transparent, logical, and efficient.