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The Friday Night Concert Series begins a new season this week. See page 4.

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# County budget season opens today with work session

BY JASON E. SILVERS

The Fort Scott Tribune

Bourbon County Commissioners are putting together plans for delving into the 2026 budget.

During a lengthy commission meeting Monday, commissioners and County Clerk Susan Walker discussed a schedule and timeline for budget work as they plan to begin seeking budget information from department heads.

Commissioners unanimously approved two motions regarding budget work. Commission Chairman Brandon Whisenhunt made a motion for all department budgets to be given to the clerk's office by June 1. Commissioner Mika Milburn-Kee made a motion to add county resident Gregg Motley as an advisor to the commission during budget work sessions.

Milburn-Kee said Motley has agreed to not be paid for his assistance.

Milburn-Kee's motion to conduct a budget work session Tuesday and add Motley as an advisor died for lack of a second.

Later commissioners agreed to conduct a work session at 4 p.m. today, with Motley participating.

Walker provided commissioners with a list of departments which she said need to present their budgets to the commission. Walker said she also shared the history of appropriations and the commission's responsibilities as required by law.

"There's also some research probably your

attorney needs to do," she said.

Walker said the list includes elected officials who are responsible for departments, or personnel who report to the elected official. She said she is keeping a "running tally" of budgets presented to the commissioners, and there is a certain timeframe to complete the budget work.

"I've created a budget timeline of all the required events to hit," she said. "We're running out of time. We either need some special meetings or workshops to get us caught up. You need May and June to get that done."

Walker said once she receives assessed valuation figures, that information will be put into the budget document so it can be determined whether the county will meet or exceed the revenue neutral rate.

"By July 20, you're required by law to have that figured out," she said.

"Revenue neutral is we decide whether we're going to raise taxes or not," Whisenhunt said to Milburn-Kee, who is in her second week as commissioner.

Walker said department heads will have some time to get budget information to the commission as assessed valuation figures won't be available until June 15. She said the commission could take advantage of an increase in property values.

"Assessed valuation drives everything," she said. "Assessed valuation will go up because property values went up 9% on average. That's new money coming into the county. If you take advantage of that new

money, that would automatically take you over RNR (revenue neutral rate.) If you leave it to neutral, you will get no new money in and you will have to cut expenses."

Commissioner David Beerbower said that matter could be discussed during the work session.

Walker said she must complete the work with assessed valuations, which County Appraiser Matt Quick must send to her by June 1.

Walker said commissioners should not base the budget off assessed valuations. She said they should hear the needs of department heads, then she will input the information into the budget to give commissioners an idea of the increase in mills that would be needed to fund the budget.

"That's where you can start cutting some things," she said. "You need to take what they're saying they need to operate."

"You shouldn't have to do it by yourself," Milburn-Kee told Walker concerning the budget.

The work session would include commissioners, Walker and Motley, and department heads could present their budgets.

"Nobody is ready. That's the problem," Walker said.

Milburn-Kee said if departments are not ready to present, commissioners can talk about starting the process.

Beerbower said with the list of departments, commissioners can begin scheduling presentations and choose which departments they wish to hear from first. Whisenhunt said he thinks

commissioners should begin with smaller budgets.

"I think we should start with the ones under our authority and work our way out," Beerbower said.

Walker said some departments, such as public works, are not ready to present budgets.

"If none of them are ready ..." Beerbower said.

Walker said the key point is the commission needs to set dates for when departments must present their budgets. Beerbower said the commission could begin discussions next week.

"Go down the list and break it down, each commissioner take so many and reach out to department heads," he said. "Hey, when can you have something? We need it now."

Commissioners discussed which departments they will take from the list and find out when those departments can meet. Beerbower said times could be set for the budget presentations to begin next week.

"Next week we can bring in our schedules at the Monday meeting, then start scheduling out from there," he said.

Walker said she had conflicts next week and could not be present. Milburn-Kee said she is concerned about the timeframe to get budget work completed.

"If we wait until every Monday to try to hash things out, this could really get run down the road here," Milburn-Kee said.

Walker said commissioners have May and June to "get it all together."

Walker said after budgets are presented, she will input information into the budget



During Monday's commission meeting, Bourbon County Clerk Susan Walker, left, and commissioners Mika Milburn-Kee and Brandon Whisenhunt look over lists of county departments to schedule for budget work sessions.

and "you can discuss where to start cutting, then bring everyone back to the table for a work session."

Milburn-Kee asked if it department heads must present their budgets during a meeting, or if the information can be emailed to Walker.

"If the first phase is to present it, can they email the information to you, then when it's ready we can bring them back?" Milburn-Kee said.

Walker said department heads must give their reasonings behind budget increases. After the budget is presented and inputted, commissioners can contact the departments to explain their requests. Milburn-Kee said the reasons could be

outlined in an email.

"We need to be very clear. At one point, you discussed having it more detailed in your budget requests," Walker said.

"We want to know where the money's going," Whisenhunt said.

Milburn-Kee said she would like to see spreadsheets used due to a "massive amount of information" for the budgets.

Whisenhunt said his suggestion would be rough draft budgets are sent to the clerk, then when the budget numbers rise, departments can be called in "one at a time" to explain why the increases are needed.

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## Mayor's Citizenship Award presented to Al, Luanna Niece

BY JASON E. SILVERS

The Fort Scott Tribune

Al Niece and his wife, Luanna, of Niece Products of Kansas, were presented with the 2025 Mayor's Citizenship Award during the annual Chamber Dinner and Awards Celebration Thursday night at the River Room event center.

The award was presented by Fort Scott Mayor Tim VanHoecke and Fort Scott City Manager Brad Matkin.

According to submitted information, the award honors service to the community and is "reserved for those whose service, leadership and commitment rises above expectations — these individuals see a need and step in; they don't wait for change but become the change."

The Nieces, who live in Texas, purchased Klein Manufacturing in Fort Scott in 2012 and transformed it into Niece Products of Kansas. In 2018, the couple purchased the Buffalo Grill from local businessman Dean Mann, changing the name of the building to the River Room, which also houses Brick Street BBQ.

The Nieces have also purchased and restored the Payne Building at Sixth and Main streets, with plans for an upstairs apartment where they will live and a separate apartment for rent, as well as an ice cream and sandwich shop on the ground floor and a "speakeasy" in the basement for people to relax and visit.

The Nieces have also supported various charities and community activities, according to submitted information.

See the Saturday, April 26 edition of the Tribune for photos of other award winners.



Al Niece, center, and his wife, Luanna, of Niece Products of Kansas, were presented with the 2025 Mayor's Citizenship Award during the annual Chamber Dinner and Awards Celebration Thursday night at the River Room event center. The award was presented by Fort Scott Mayor Tim VanHoecke, second from left, and Fort Scott City Manager Brad Matkin, right.

WEATHER

Showers and thunderstorms likely. High near 71. East wind 6 to 11 mph becoming south in the afternoon. Chance of precipitation is 90%.

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