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## **Personal view: Are you getting your money's worth from Cuyahoga County government?**

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Cuyahoga County property owners recently received a reappraisal of their property from the county's fiscal office. For many property owners, the reappraisal will result in a substantial property tax increase in 2019. Most of the increase will flow to the Cuyahoga County government, so it's worth asking how the county government is spending the public's tax dollars and whether the public is getting its money's worth.

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Most people will be surprised to hear that the county government spends about \$1.7 billion, or about \$3,200 for each of the 535,000 households in Cuyahoga County. That total doesn't include the spending of other county-level entities like the Cleveland Metroparks, the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, Cuyahoga County Community College or the Cuyahoga County Public Library.

Last fall, Cuyahoga County Executive Armond Budish proposed a preliminary [budget](#) by department, and Cuyahoga County Council [approved](#) the 2018-19 county budgets with minor changes in December 2017. Outside of county bureaucrats and a few policy wonks, probably no one read the supporting documents, and the budget gained little news coverage.

But even if the public were interested, it would be very difficult to find and interpret the Cuyahoga County budget because the final budget has nearly 400 individual line items ranging in size from about \$300 to over \$125 million, organized into more than 70 departments, boards and commissions. The budget is summarized into general categories, but it's hard to determine what is in the categories. Moreover, the recent budget is not comparable to the 2016-17 budget structure and lacks detail on the final 2017 spending and the major items of salaries and fringe benefits.

However, if one organizes the budget into the major functional groups with common sense definitions, it is possible to link the budget numbers of individual county departments to what Cuyahoga County citizens expect from their government.

Here are a few examples of how much each household is paying for the different functions of county government and a few observations to put the spending in context:

- Over 40% of the county budget is spent on Cuyahoga County health and human services. Each household spends about \$1,360 (\$727.8 million) on mental health and drug services and services to children and families, those with developmental disabilities, seniors and veterans, as well as subsidies to service providers and the MetroHealth System. With few exceptions, most agencies do not indicate how many persons they serve. Neither the vague mission statements provided in the budget nor the strategic plans on the agencies' website seem to connect to real performance indicators. Essentially, the county spends almost three-quarters of a billion dollars on human services to Cuyahoga County residents in need and it's not possible for any citizen to determine whether the budget is sufficient or excessive, or whether any progress is being made on the basic social problems the agency is intended to address.
- Each household also spends \$712 (\$381 million) on legal and safety services, including the courts, the prosecutor and public defender, the county sheriff, the medical examiner and other safety services. As with the health and social services, it's difficult to evaluate whether county households are enjoying the safety and security they want and deserve, but a simple visit to the county courts and the Justice Center doesn't suggest bustling efficiency.
- The county's administrative functions cost each household about \$50 (\$27 million). However, administrative costs will grow by almost 9% from 2018 to 2019, when the overall budget is growing by 1%.
- Each household is funding at least \$280 of benefits doled out by the county's human resource department. Based on a human resources budget of nearly \$150 million and projected workforce of about 7,700, the county spends an average of nearly \$20,000 per employee. The need to accommodate a 6% increase in FLEX benefits payments and a 2% cost-of-living adjustment for county employees in departmental budgets seems to have received little public attention, but was a recurrent problem faced by many departments as shown throughout the preliminary budget documents. It may well become even more of a problem in the future, since the budget projects a slight increase in full-time employees in a county with a decreasing population.
- Each household spends about \$214 (\$114.6 million) to finance development-related operations, the hotel and airport, development debt and workforce training. Economic growth is supposedly a high priority for the county, but the development department offers no "key performance indicators" – no surprise because there has been little growth in the county's employment base. The Workforce Development Board touts its office move as a key accomplishment and promises "new target strategies" in the future. If one digs into the county's portfolio of development assets and debt accumulated from past years (which includes debt for Steelyard Commons, the Global Center for Health Innovation and the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland, the airport and hotel), one can see many underperforming assets or assets that require subsidies.
- The county spends about \$177 per household on managing infrastructure repairs, including improvements of roads and bridges by the county engineer, solid waste management projects and sanitary engineer projects. (Water and sewer projects are managed by the regional sewer board.) In addition, the county is planning to spend about \$87 million more in its capital improvement budget. This is a substantial amount of money, but a million dollars doesn't buy a lot of infrastructure. To put the spending in perspective, the total operational and capital spending on infrastructure is about the amount spent on the Board for Developmental Disabilities. It's not

surprising that many citizens are concerned about the deterioration of local roads, bridges and sewer.

So that's how Cuyahoga County is spending \$1.7 billion.

After the county reform in 2010, many people expected better performance from county government. It would be better if county government were restructured into fewer cabinet-level departments with clearly defined missions and performance indicators linked to defined output metrics such as persons served. It would be better if there was a more transparent budget process, with online documents, updated in real time, providing comparative data on what has been spent and accomplished over the past several years. It would be better if local nonprofits analyzed the budget carefully and local news organizations reported more about the budget process so that area residents would know what they are paying for.

The county government is spending \$3,200 per household. Is the county government running efficiently, creating a climate for economic growth, making the county safer and getting services to the people who need them? The budget process and documents don't tell you, and they should.

Until citizens demand real budgetary accountability from Cuyahoga County government, you won't be able to tell if you are getting your money's worth.

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Inline Play

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