Salt Lake County
Mayor Jenny Wilson's
2027 Budget Proposal Speech

October 20, 2026

Members of the County Council, elected officials, County employees, community partners, and residents of Salt Lake County: thank you.

Today, I present my proposed 2027 budget. First, I want to thank Darrin Casper, Rod Kitchens, and our entire budget team for their dedication and long hours. I am also grateful to my elected colleagues and staff throughout County government who take this responsibility so seriously.

A Restrained Budget

This is a restrained budget recommendation, shaped by limited revenues. We know families are struggling—housing, groceries, utilities, health care, and childcare. Everything costs more.

With that reality in mind, this proposal is structurally balanced, with only a few programs receiving additional staff or funding. Many worthwhile investments will have to wait. In fact, nearly $13 million in funding requests and 65 new positions are not included in my proposal.

Fees and Family Costs

Throughout County government, we have also been evaluating the fees we charge for arts and culture, parks and recreation, and health services. Given this sluggish economy, this proposal delays fee increases for those services. It is simply not the right time to add costs at our recreation centers, arts facilities, health department, or other areas.

Our Employees

I want to highlight several other recommendations. I am proposing a 3.25 percent salary increase for our County employees. Our workforce is incredibly hardworking and dedicated. They, too, are facing the burdens of higher prices.

Salt Lake County continues to face challenges maintaining competitive pay for sworn officers. I am proposing an increase of up to 5.75 percent to support stability in our law enforcement workforce. Our employees' dedication makes every service we provide possible.

Regarding the health care benefit: Employees enrolled in the high-deductible health plan will see no premium increase. Those on the PPO plans and the County will pay an additional 2 percent.

Technology

With technology risks growing, it's important to keep essential systems current. This budget includes projects that will strengthen and modernize our data security, governance, and AI usage. Maintaining reliable operations and meeting technology and licensing needs cannot be postponed. This year's recommendation follows significant investments in critical cybersecurity infrastructure from last year.

Arts, Parks, and Open Space

Through funding sources outside the general fund, we continue to invest in arts, culture, open space, trails, and recreation. Right now, walls are going up at the 800-seat Larry H. and Gail Miller Arts Center in Daybreak, a new arts center that will host local and national shows in our southwest part of the valley for families all over the County.

Our "My County Rec Pass" program continues to grow, with now well over 100,000 kids signing up for free access to our recreation centers. Last week, the Council approved funding for hundreds of organizations through our Zoo, Arts and Parks program. Our Parks & Rec Master Plan showed us, time and again, that people have asked for more open space, more trails, and more access to nature. We are expanding our 4,000 acres of open space with beautiful wild spaces in Dimple Dell and Big Cottonwood Regional Parks, and hundreds of miles of trails across the County.

This month, Butterfield Canyon trails hosted the Utah High School Mountain Bike races for kids and families. And more is planned on those trails. Our Tourism, Recreation, Culture, and Convention (TRCC) and open-space investments continue to support places families enjoy. This year, we opened new playgrounds, secured new open space, and just yesterday began welcoming folks to the new swim lanes at the South Jordan Recreation Center.

Seniors and Savings

We also look forward to reopening the 10th East Senior Center this spring, with millions in New Market Tax Credit funding helping cover the building's cost. Literally millions of dollars that county taxpayers won't need to cover. And we will invest further in our energy management programs that have helped the County avoid nearly $12 million in costs through renewable vehicles, buildings, and programs.

And with food insecurity growing alongside our aging population, I am recommending a much-needed expansion of Meals on Wheels to provide 24,000 more meals to seniors across Salt Lake County. All of these recommendations protect essential services while limiting new commitments.

The Salt Palace

Thanks to support from the state creating a new downtown district, our Salt Palace Convention Center architectural and construction teams are hard at work in preparing to break ground on the convention center's renovation in late 2027. So, please buy more hot dogs at Mammoth and Jazz games because part of your sales tax will go toward a revitalized convention center!

Investing in Public Safety

I now want to address the most consequential recommendation in this budget: the investments required to transform our criminal justice system and modernize our jail.

In recent years, more than 70 percent of our County's general fund has supported criminal justice: prosecuting crime, providing defense for those who cannot afford it, operating our jails, and offering alternatives to incarceration. This is the foundation of what county government does.

A Better Approach

Over the past several years—and especially in recent months—my team, our housing and human services leaders, the Sheriff, the District Attorney, the Legal Defenders Association, and community partners have worked tirelessly to design a better approach. Improving this system is one of our greatest opportunities to deliver better results for both justice-involved individuals and taxpayers. Our work with retired Miami-Dade County Judge Steven Leifman and his team has helped us take the next step: examining where our efforts work, where coordination breaks down, and where gaps in services and funding undermine results.

Treatment Instead of Jail

Beginning early in 2027, we will significantly reboot our criminal justice system. This budget proposal will allow us to start diverting eligible nonviolent offenders with mental health challenges directly into treatment under the supervision of a dedicated case management team that reports back to our Criminal Justice Services team and District Attorney's office. For people who can be safely served outside the jail, supervised treatment offers an opportunity to address the conditions contributing to repeated offenses.

This budget proposal offers investment in key initiatives identified through our Leifman review process. It adds case managers and peer support specialists to the system. It also offers resources for additional supportive housing, an area that we have coordinated with the state, cities, and nonprofit providers to build, leading to a decrease in the number of homeless individuals living on the streets for the first time since the COVID pandemic. We are also standardizing our screening system at our jail. We need a common language and a proven evaluation system to determine who is eligible for diversion and who needs to be behind bars.

Having met with peer counties across the nation, where we have reviewed notes and progress in this area, I am proud! Salt Lake County is leading in building a more just, modern, coordinated, and cost-effective system. This proposal brings these efforts together with the need to modernize our jail.

Closing Oxbow and Modernizing the Jail

Conditions have changed since the Metro Jail opened 27 years ago, and Oxbow eight years before that. Increased mental health services are needed now more than ever. Inmates wait longer than we would like for their trials due to a backlog of cases. And deferred maintenance is extensive – in fact, it is estimated at over $100 million.

Oxbow Jail, one of our two facilities, has outlived its useful life. I propose closing it and replacing those beds at our primary facility, our Metro Jail. Continuing to repair outdated buildings without improving their functionality leaves us paying more while the underlying problems remain. There is never an easy time to fund a major capital project. But postponing necessary work does not make its cost disappear.

The Cost and the Increase

After extensive study and fine-tuning, $660 million in capital investment is needed to fund jail consolidation. I also propose setting aside $15 million for the capital costs of a future center for people awaiting a treatment bed, either through the proposed diversion system or after leaving jail. The County has already set aside $100 million for jail modernization. With the Council's approval, Salt Lake County will bond for about $575 million. The proposed property tax increase is about $5.85 a month for the owner of an average home, or just over $70 a year. We plan to repay the bond over 25 years.

Consolidation of the two facilities will allow us to coordinate staff and services, reduce duplication, and focus our investment. Modernization will support secure custody, medical and mental health care, programming, and preparation for release. The project would also build a new intake and screening hub, laundry facility, secure vehicle drop-off site, warehouse and loading dock, administrative segregation unit, and surface parking lot.

Our employees deserve a safe workplace. People in custody deserve humane conditions and appropriate care. Taxpayers deserve efficient government. We have an opportunity to advance the facility improvements and the reforms together.

I know this request comes at a difficult time for household budgets. That is why so many other requests have been declined, and why this investment must remain focused on improving safety and reducing costs over time. Public safety is essential, and delay carries real costs.

Why Safety Matters

I want to share a conversation that has stayed with me. I once interviewed an out-of-state candidate for a relatively modest-paying job at Salt Lake County. Accepting it would mean moving his family and starting again in a new community. I asked why he would consider making the move. His answer was simple.

"Because it's safe."

He wanted a place where his family could build a life and feel secure. That answer reminded me that public safety is everything to county residents. It shapes where we raise our children, open a business, and put down roots. And this is a safe community. We need to keep it that way. Preserving safety requires investment and a willingness to change approaches that are no longer serving us well.

Mental Health and the Jail

Across America, the shift that began in the 1950s from institutional mental health has not been consistently matched by adequate community care. Too many people with serious mental illness end up on the streets or in jail. Our Sheriff and hardworking jail employees did not create that failure, but they have been asked to manage its consequences.

A jail cell cannot substitute for a functioning mental health system. Of course, some people must be incarcerated to protect the public and maintain order. But when someone can be safely supervised and treated in a setting that better addresses their needs, that option should be available.

Too often, incarceration has become the response because the right alternative was missing. When a jail cell is the only tool available, mental health challenges become a jail problem.

This budget will change that.

Real People, Real Families

And behind every decision about budgets, facilities, treatment, and supervision are real people. Many of us know what it means to love someone struggling with addiction. I do!

The late-night phone call. The uncertainty about where someone is or whether they are safe. The hope that treatment will work, followed by fear of another crisis. Parents, spouses, siblings, and friends struggle to help. Families need a support system that offers a credible path to care, clear expectations, and help beyond the immediate crisis. The same is true for families facing serious mental illness.

For those who lose someone to suicide, the grief continues long after the immediate shock. I am personally grieving the loss of two close friends to suicide. Their deaths have deepened my resolve to help build a system that recognizes risk and connects people to care.

Suicide prevention must be part of this work, including recognizing warning signs and maintaining care as people move between custody, treatment, and the community. We cannot prevent every tragedy. But we must do everything within our responsibility to give people a path toward help and hope.

Accountability on All Sides

The plan before us also emphasizes accountability. People who commit serious offenses must face consequences. Those who pose a danger must be securely held when required by law and the courts. Victims deserve protection, support, and a system that takes their experiences seriously.

Diversion carries obligations: attending treatment, appearing in court, maintaining contact with supervision, and following an individualized plan. The County and its partners have obligations as well. A treatment plan means little if treatment is unavailable. A release plan is incomplete if it provides only phone numbers without an actual connection to care. Accountability belongs on all sides.

One Person at a Time

Consider someone who repeatedly enters jail with untreated mental illness and addiction. Each booking can become another isolated episode. The immediate crisis is managed. The person leaves. The pattern repeats. The family worries again. Officers respond again. Taxpayers pay again. In the system we are building, that pattern will be interrupted.

And this reboot of the system will require sustained cooperation among the Council, the Sheriff, the District Attorney, the courts, Legal Defenders, human services teams, and treatment partners. It will require partnership with the state and cities, and listening to victims, families, and frontline employees. We will measure results every year and adjust as we go. I am grateful to everyone already helping us move forward.

We can insist on accountability while providing an effective path to treatment. We can protect victims, support families, and reduce unnecessary incarceration. Those responsibilities belong together.

Because It's Safe

In closing, I return to that candidate's answer.

"Because it's safe."

Everything else is downstream from that. Salt Lake County is leading in this challenging work and making decisions that are both fiscally sound and benefit the individuals in the system. All the while preserving what makes our community special.

Thank you!