

Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson's Proposed 2024 Budget Address

October 24, 2023

It's great to be with you today. Thank you Council, Elected Officials, employees, and members of the public for joining today!

I want to thank the budget staff embedded throughout the County but especially Darrin Casper, Rod Kitchens and their teams for their excellent work to date on this budget.

I am deeply proud of our County's collective work and the excellent services we provide, day in and day out to our residents. The wide range of services – from recording deeds to keeping our seniors active and healthy – is made possible by extremely dedicated employees who excel at what they do.

When we face a crisis in our community... When we are tested – as we have been in recent years due to COVID and last year's flooding crisis – it's our employees who excel at their respective positions by stepping up and literally saving lives and property. They demonstrate the value of our services to our residents and our city partners.

For example, in early August, the skies opened and in less than an hour dumped 2 inches of rain over Draper. The rushing water ate away at backyards and shut down Rambling Road Roundabout along with parts of Highland Drive and Bangarter Parkway. During that time Public Works staff member Landen Crump labored through the night to organize Salt Lake County's support for Draper in the face of this historic storm. He and other dedicated staff worked shoulder to shoulder with Draper city and its residents on the cleanup effort, stretching themselves in service to our community, until 11 o'clock that morning.

That was an intense evening, but each of our employees, like Landen, day in and day out - demonstrate excellent service during our traditional course of business.

And, despite an extremely challenging budget this year, I AM COMMITTED TO CONTINUING TO PROVIDE OUTSTANDING SERVICES TO OUR RESIDENTS AND SUPPORTING THE STAFF WHO PROVIDE THOSE SERVICES.

You are already aware there has been a slowdown in tax revenues this year. It is no secret that this economy is stretched thin by inflation and the high cost of goods.

Salt Lake County residents are faced with managing their households with less purchasing power per dollar – and so are we. And unlike the Federal budget, Salt Lake County balances our budget every year! In this budget, our objective is clear: spending money strategically without compromising the essential services our community relies on.

And while the general fund budget I am presenting to the Council today contains measures to limit spending beyond previous years, there are also some exciting new proposals made possible through dedicated funding streams, including our Tourism, Recreation, Cultural and Convention fund.

This year, the request review process was the most difficult I have faced to date as Mayor. With declining revenue growth, the downward bias of our property tax and rising health care costs to the County, 90% of all new requests were denied. Additionally, my proposed budget recommends strategic decisions to manage tax dollars prudently. Salt Lake County must continue its commitment and goal to provide the most cost-effective, resident-driven services in the nation. As one of only a handful of counties to receive a AAA bond rating, we are proud to stand as one of the most fiscally responsible counties in the nation, all the while embracing excellent service delivery. Our county offices that collectively assure our financial integrity are to be commended.

So, let's get into the specifics of this year's budget proposal.

Property and sales tax revenue growth is less than 2 percent and was immediately absorbed by a 10 percent increase in the cost of health care. With no additional revenue and to avoid layoffs and substantial program cuts, I am recommending tools that limit spending.

The strategy includes:

1. Implementing a hiring freeze and eliminating dozens of vacant full-time positions that have remained unfilled for six months or more, excluding positions currently in the HR process. This strategic hiring freeze allows us to prioritize essential roles while minimizing the impact on our programs.
2. Restricting personnel expenditures by 3%. This disciplined approach ensures that we make the most of our available resources.
3. Placing a 2% restriction on spending in program budgets.
4. Cutting county-wide travel expenses in half, resulting in savings of approximately \$1 million. This reduction in travel expenses is a prudent move that allows us to reallocate funds to essential services.
5. The vast majority of general fund new requests from our divisions and departments were denied. This careful review process ensures that we allocate resources to the most critical areas and contractual requirements. Among the limited programs recommended is funding for the 2024 Presidential year election.

These disciplined measures will allow us to provide additional compensation to our employees as they are faced with a rising cost of living. I'll be honest and share that it is lower than I would like to recommend.

I am proposing a 2.75% salary increase for our general employees as well as additional pay to our sworn officers which ensures they don't slip further behind neighboring jurisdictions.

I am also proposing a round of employee recognition pay. Employees in the lowest pay grades would receive an additional 2 percent, middle grades would receive 1.5 percent, and the highest-paid employees would receive 1 percent in the form of a one-time payment.

With the county facing a 10 percent increase in health care costs we won't be passing that cost along to the vast majority of our employees. Most employees are enrolled in the High-Deductible Health Plan and will continue to pay zero dollars in monthly premiums. Our High Deductible plan is appreciated by and is beneficial to our workforce.

Our commitment to cost of living adjustments, no-cost health care, and appreciation bonuses reflects our recognition of the workforce's extraordinary efforts.

Putting tax dollars to good use in the service of our residents is an imperative. This past April, a pair of county residents approached Utah Community Action (UCA), for help paying their rent. The couple was struggling to cover their bills. Initially, they both had jobs, but one had faced surgery, and the other a reduction in work hours, resulting in their income being limited to just \$709 a month!

The couple was approved for rental assistance funded by Salt Lake County's Landlord and Tenant Mediation program. They also were assigned to a case manager, who helped them land new jobs. They attended financial literacy courses and received heat utility assistance.

Thanks to three months of rental assistance provided by the county, the support of their case manager, and their own hard work, by the end of July, the clients had stable jobs, and had managed to increase their monthly income significantly, from \$709 to \$4,097.

Let me be clear, without this assistance it is likely this struggling couple would have ended up on the streets, counted as another statistic in Utah's struggle with homelessness.

Instead, they now have long-term housing stability. This is the work we do in Salt Lake County.

Investments in our libraries, our world-renowned open spaces, parks, and recreation facilities are another way we demonstrate our commitment to improving quality of life for our residents.

Many of you on the council were there when we cut the ribbon on two important recreational trails: The Butterfield Regional Trailhead Park and the completion of Parley's Trail.

Butterfield Regional Trailhead Park provides more than 13 miles of multi-use trail within the Southwest Canyon Trails Network. I enjoyed a beautiful Saturday morning just a few weeks ago, where, alongside Council Member Alvord we watched the first high school NICA bike race! A resounding success!

Parley's Trail is the first east-west trail linking the Bonneville Shoreline Trail on the east to the Jordan River Parkway to the west. The area also offers an abundance of historical, cultural, natural, and scenic resources.

Although our programs won't be growing in 2024, we will continue to focus on priorities including addressing housing affordability and homelessness.

Housing affordability is a problem that is felt not just here in Salt Lake County, but as you know, across the entire country. In 2024, thanks to our previous \$20 million investment in our Affordable Housing Trust Fund, we anticipate the opening of many new housing units. By the end of 2026, we anticipate this funding will make more than 1,500 housing units available.

These projects are more than mere buildings; they represent hope for many in need of an affordable place to live.

We are committed to the ongoing transformation of our county government, streamlining, and modernizing everywhere we can.

In addition to increasing housing inventory, our commitment to residents extends to water conservation and air quality initiatives. We are actively installing solar arrays on county facilities to reduce our carbon footprint and to lead by example in renewable energy utilization – all while doing our part to conserve water at county facilities and supporting cities to do the same.

Last week, alongside the planetarium team, while viewing the eclipse, a woman approached me with her young son and enthusiastically thanked me for the variety of county programs she enjoys with her son -- our libraries, parks, and recreation centers.

Let me describe a scene that unfolds nearly every day across Salt Lake County by taking you to Dimple Dell Recreation Center in Sandy.

At 5 pm on a typical Tuesday, when school has been out for a couple of hours, the pool, basketball courts, and rock-climbing wall are all crawling with our youth.

At a time when our kids are too often consumed by their cell phones and iPads, our rec centers are places where these young people can come explore new hobbies, discover new passions, and build community. Many of these kids come multiple times a week, so our staff tends to see a lot of familiar faces. In fact, a few of the kids that come in most regularly have been known to go on to get part-time jobs at the center, learning life skills and earning additional income.

We understand the critical role of recreation and its direct impact on kids' well-being – not only on their physical health, but their mental health as well. This is important, especially at a time when we read report after report of record numbers of children suffering from anxiety and depression.

But for some kids, coming up with the money for a rec center pass simply isn't possible. It's a reality in Salt Lake County that some families must choose between paying rent, putting food on the table and paying medical expenses.

Using TRCC revenues and with the resounding support from its advisory board, I'm proposing that we open our recreation centers, free of charge, to all kids in Salt Lake County!

When this proposal was rolled out at the TRCC meeting last week, one member shared that her young son loves to play basketball at one of our rec centers. The fee is five dollars, but she hands her son a ten dollar bill every time he goes. There is a little boy in the neighborhood that can't afford to go, and she and her family cover the fee without the boy even knowing it. I can't even imagine how many kids would benefit from this exciting program change. And my hats off to Martin Jensen and his employees. The rec staff knows that there will be an additional challenge to service with more kids in the centers and they are excited to meet this challenge.

In the same spirit and with our residents' challenges in mind, I am happy to propose – thanks in large part to our library board and county council — the elimination of kid's library late fees. While these fees may be relatively small, it's important not to penalize a child for keeping a book a bit longer. I am certain this program will help eliminate obstacles that stand in the way of children engaging their minds through our award-winning libraries.

Despite the challenges with our budget, our overarching goals remain clear: Foster community well-being, ensure the safety and health of our residents, promote inclusive growth, elevate living standards, and continue the transformative journey of our government.

In closing, want to acknowledge the outstanding work of our various departments and divisions that provide all the services I've highlighted today and more. Our elected offices, public safety divisions, public libraries, community services, human services, and public works departments play critical roles in serving our community, and we remain committed to maintaining, if not enhancing, the services they provide.

Council, elected officials, Salt Lake County residents and employees, this budget represents our unwavering commitment to not just residents of this county and our employees but most importantly to the eye we have on the promising future of Salt Lake County – a future that we must work together to preserve for the kids who rock climb for the first time at the Taylorsville Rec Center, who swim at Dimple Dell, or play hockey at Steiner Aquatic Center.

This budget is a balanced approach that considers the challenges we face without compromising our optimism for a brighter future. It is a budget that believes in the resilience and potential of our community.

I ask for your support in turning these plans into reality. Thank you.