

Use this budget role play to engage students in government policy and decision making.

- Divide class into groups with up to 7 commissioners and 1 county manager, and 6 county departments
- Commissioners and manager will assume roles listed.
- Departments will make budget requests to commissioners, who will vote to approve the budget. The challenge? Departments need more money than is available unless commissioners deny or reduce the requests, cut other services or raise taxes.

COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Johnson

You were elected as the “education commissioner,” since you are always arguing that the county budget must include plenty of money for local schools. Right now, you (and the other commissioners) know that several local schools’ test scores have been pretty low, at least partially due to outdated textbooks and because of poor teacher retention. Teachers are leaving for higher-paying jobs. Additionally, you know that a few of the schools are in desperate need of building upgrades. You are up for re-election this year and know that if the schools do not get a sufficient allocation, you may not get re-elected.

Commissioner Miller

Your son is an extremely hard-working social worker in the county, who constantly complains about the lack of funding for foster care and social services. He has shared countless stories with you about how he and his fellow colleagues are overworked due to the small number of social workers relative to the large workloads. Some of the stories involve child abuse and neglect, and quite frankly what you’ve heard has deeply saddened you. Since you were elected county commissioner you have been a big supporter of the social services/child abuse agencies, because you feel that hundreds of children would receive much better care if there were additional funds allocated there. Even if it means that other services, such as schools, receive less.

Commissioner Brown

You are interested in running for Governor one day. You are interested in what’s going on in the county, especially the things that you think will make you look better to voters. You are trying to figure out what the public wants for this year’s county budget. Lower taxes or more money for schools?

Commissioner Kendrick

You are extremely disappointed with jails and courts in North Carolina and in your county. There has been a recent rise in crime, which you believe is strongly correlated with a lack of adequate jail security, courtrooms or jail space. People know they can commit a crime and get away with it...even at the jail or courthouse! In recent years, you believe that public safety has clearly not been adequately funded. You are certain that with more funding for jail security and court services, citizens in your county will feel safer because crime will decrease.



Commissioner Williams

You are a huge believer in democracy and feel that elections are one of the greatest ways for “the people” to make their voice heard. You also know that due to budget issues, for a few years now the elections office has not received the funds it needs to upgrade elections equipment and hire enough staff. This year’s presidential election will bring more voters to the polls. You want to be sure that that people have enough places to vote, and that the election goes smoothly with no errors – the county does not need that kind of publicity!

Commissioner Reynolds

You think that the best kind of government stays out of people’s way. You think that the county should not be funding most of what’s in the budget, and should instead focus on core services. You do not think the schools are doing a good job, and that they deserve much less money than last year. They waste the money they receive anyway. You think the county taxes are too high as it is. You think that parks are just wasted land that could be developed for businesses. You have been a commissioner for 20 years, and are confident in your re-election.

Commissioner Case

You have served on the commission for 10 years, but have decided this year to run for a different office. You think the county has done a good job over the past few years, with decreased funding available. However, you think that it is time for public schools and parks to receive more funding. If there is not enough money available to fully fund these services, you support a property tax increase to give the county more money to fund important services like schools and parks.

COUNTY MANAGER

County Manager Smith

You have been the county’s professional manager for 5 years. Before that, you served in manager roles in other cities. You and your staff have worked hard to put together budget recommendations that ensure that the county’s priorities are in line with how the county spends its money. You want the commissioners and public to support what you think should be done for the county. In some cases, as with funding for debt services – mandatory interest payments on funds borrowed and used to construct county buildings and parks – the commissioners must fund the entire amount. Other budget funds, such as for libraries, are completely optional for the county to have in the budget.

COUNTY DEPARTMENTS

Board of Education

Schools have been struggling with reduced funding from the county and the state. Textbooks are outdated, schools need better technology, and teachers have not had raises in 4 years. You know that there are other important public services in the county in need of funding just as much as the board of education, but you feel that every year public education is not adequately funded, thousands of kids in your county suffer as a result.

County commissioners determine how much funding to allocate to schools (only teacher salaries are provided through state funding; teacher bonuses, school construction and other funding is determined locally). School boards then determine how to allocate these funds. After an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county school board needs \$278,000,000 from the county this year, which includes \$13,000,000 more than last year.

Courts, jails and police

The community's courtrooms and jails need more security. That helps keep the employees, prisoners and community safer. In addition, more public defenders and courts services staff need to be hired so that more cases can move through the court system. As it is, the courts are overloaded meaning that some trials don't take place for years after the crimes took place. Criminals know they can get away with more than they used to, because public safety has been funded less.

Your division has reviewed the costs of making needed changes, and asks the county to increase funding this year with \$4,500,000 for extra security for jails, \$6,000,000 for police to address increases in population and crime, and \$300,000 for more prosecutors and defenders for court cases. That brings the total county funding for these 3 areas to \$221,500,000.

Board of Elections

The elections equipment in your county is outdated and in dire need of replacement. Additional equipment must be purchased, more polling places opened, and more elections staff hired so that everyone can vote in the presidential election. Elections leaders think that making people wait too long to vote, and not using the most updated equipment has made many people lose their faith in the county's democratic system. This is a problem that must be addressed, and unfortunately, significantly more funding than the board of elections typically receives will be necessary.

Based on an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county's board of elections needs \$1,500,000 from the county, which includes \$630,000 more than last year.

Public Health Department

The entire nation is currently experiencing a health crisis, and the effects are being felt strongly throughout the county. Until four years ago, when funding levels were decreased, the county health department provided free and low-cost healthcare for some families with children, pregnant women, and disabled adults, who could not otherwise afford reliable healthcare. The health department also provided free shots and vaccinations for children and free checkups for local school sports teams. Not surprisingly, in the last four years, the county has become increasingly unhealthy. Young children are getting sick more often, and because so many are without vaccinations, sickness spreads very quickly. Students miss school and fall behind. Adults are sick and cannot work.

You feel that a healthy county is of the utmost importance. After an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county public health department needs a total of \$31,900,000 of county funds for communicable and non-communicable disease prevention and treatment, including \$2,400,000 in new funding.

Department of Social Services – Child Abuse and Neglect

For a variety of reasons, social services in your county are in increasingly high demand. With the recent downturn in the economy, unemployment rates have doubled. More and more families are economically disadvantaged. Because your department serves so many people, you have an overburdened staff of social workers. Unfortunately, you suspect that some recent cases of child abuse might have been prevented if social workers had had more time to spend on individual cases. You feel that with a few additional positions social workers would be able to spread out their workloads in such a way as to more adequately ensure the safety of children.

You feel that adequate funding would not only help improve children's well-being and the caseloads of social workers, but that it might even save lives. After an extensive needs assessment, you have determined that the county department of social services needs \$19,000,000 for child abuse and neglect funding from the county, including an increase of \$1,500,000 from last year.

Libraries

Everyone loves the library, right? The library system is the place where people learn, use the computer, research information, check out books and videos and more. The county libraries have worked hard to locate branches in areas across the community, make them accessible through the week, and employ people through jobs. As the county grows, so do the needs of the library. In recent years, libraries have had to deal with cuts in county funding. When schools receive more money, services like libraries receive less. The library staff does not feel that their roles are less important, and need more funding.

After a needs assessment, you have determined that the libraries need \$26,000,000 in county funding, including \$3,200,000 more than last year's amount in order to increase services for children and teens.

FY 2011 Budget Development - note: selected line items from Mecklenburg County 2011 budget

Program Category	FY 2010 Approved Budget	Requested Increase	FY2011 Request	Final Allocation	Comments
PRIORITY LEVEL 1					
Child Abuse/Neglect Prevention and Protection	17,500,000	1,500,000	19,000,000		For more monitoring and investigations.
School System Operations Funding	265,000,000	13,000,000	278,000,000		Per funding agreement for increase in student count.
Police Department	175,000,000	6,000,000	181,000,000		To address population growth and increase in crime.
Debt Service - County	81,000,000	16,000,000	97,000,000		Based on payback schedule. Cannot underfund this.
PRIORITY LEVEL 2					
Jail and Detention Facility Operations	34,500,000	4,500,000	39,000,000		For security at new courthouse and jail facility.
Communicable Illness and Disease Prevention and Treatment	1,600,000	300,000	1,900,000		For updated lab equipment and prevention programs.
PRIORITY LEVEL 3					
Library Services	22,800,000	3,200,000	26,000,000		Opening of new children's library - staffing and operating cost, more books and materials.
Non-Communicable Illness/Disease Prevention and Treatment	27,900,000	2,100,000	30,000,000		For flu vaccines and alternative programs.
PRIORITY LEVEL 4					
Voting Services	1,370,000	630,000	2,000,000		To get ready for presidential elections.
Community Violence Protection and Prevention	250,000	10,000	260,000		For community outreach.
Court Services	1,200,000	300,000	1,500,000		For more prosecutors and public defenders.
Total Expenditures	628,120,000	47,540,000	675,660,000		
Total Projected Revenue Increase		20,000,000	Tax Increase:		
Projected Funding Gap		(27,540,000)	Suplus/Deficit:		
Options: 1. Reduce current service levels 2. Increase property taxes (1 cent = \$4,000,000) 3. Some combination of both					