

Budget Meeting Observation

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The Sarasota County Library System currently consists of ten branches and is overseen by the Sarasota County Commissioners (BCC), which includes five members representing five separate districts (SCGov, n.d., para.2). In addition to watching the First Budget Public Hearing, I also watched the Final Budget Workshop (Budget Workshop 5) to gain more clarity on the budgeting process. Both workshops and hearings are made available to the public. The hearings seem to serve as a capstone to a much longer deliberation process. For instance, the First Budget Public Hearing lasts under an hour, whereas Budget Workshop 5 runs nearly four hours.

Budget Workshop 5 — August 19, 2025

We begin with Budget Workshop 5, which occurred on August 19 (Sarasota County Commission, 2025). The five members of the Sarasota County Commission present were Teresa Mast (District 1), Mark Smith (District 2), Tom Knight (District 3), Joe Neunder (District 4), and Ron Cutsinger (District 5). Also prominent in much of the discussion was County Administrator Jonathan Lewis. After the Pledge of Allegiance, members of the public were allowed to address the board. A former congressional candidate, Martin Hyde (Eger, 2022, para. 2), chastised the board for not keeping departmental budget increases capped at 5%. He argued that the police could continue using old firearms and avoid purchasing \$7,000 radios.

County Administrator Jonathan Lewis then laid out the session's agenda, which included budgetary requests from the State Attorney's Office and the Supervisor of

Elections, followed by a best practices discussion. Office of Financial Management Director Kimberli Radtke and Deputy County Administrator Steven Botelho were present during a slideshow on the proposed Fiscal Year 2026 budget, which showed revenue distribution from the General Fund and increased budgets for growing agencies.

Budgetary restrictions seemed to be a looming concern, especially when it came to forecasting future budgets. Commissioner Knight expressed doubt about the feasibility of a projected 21% increase, citing economic uncertainty from Tallahassee. Commissioner Teresa Mast was adamant about not raising millage rates, the property tax rate per \$1,000 of assessed value (Sarasota County Tax Collector, n.d., para.1). She emphasized that the proposed budgets were not about increasing services but maintaining the status quo, something she wished the media would explain better. Commissioner Cutsinger anticipated more budget cuts due to the Florida Legislature doubling the Homestead Exemption. Commissioner Mark Smith predicted that Fiscal Year 2027 would require significant reductions.

After a 15-minute break, State Attorney Ed Brodsky presented funding requests for technology and specialty courts. For example, he explained how police body cam footage takes time and resources to review and transcribe but helps resolve complaints against the police department quickly. He also discussed the societal benefits of rehabilitating inmates, noting that successful reentry programs like Drug Court and Juvenile Truancy Court reduce recidivism and save taxpayer money.

Later, Supervisor of Elections Ron Turner defended his budget requests to cover the costs of administering elections. In the past year alone, 89,000 new voters registered in the county, while others left the rolls due to death or relocation. Turner also

discussed plans for a new early voting site, which would require additional funding for staff and equipment. Commissioner Mast thanked him for keeping his increase to just 2.7%. Turner added that his office tries to return any unused funds when possible.

Commissioner Knight voiced concerns about upcoming capital projects, including a new library in Longboat Key, a new history center, and the 17th Street Regional Park sports facility. Commissioner Mast explained that canceling those projects would not be cost-effective, as contracts are already in place and the county would incur penalties. Commissioner Neunde also argued that projects like 17th Street Regional Park would generate tourism revenue. Knight ultimately agreed but urged caution when approving future projects.

Later in the session, Commissioner Mast led a vote for the Board of County Commissioners to relinquish responsibility for the School Board Fee of \$589,556.00 which the BCC had covered for 23 years. This cost was now shifted to the School Board. The vote was swift, highlighting the commission's willingness to cut expenses they no longer deemed necessary.

First Budget Public Hearing — September 10, 2025

All five commissioners and County Administrator Jonathan Lewis were present. After the Pledge of Allegiance, the public was invited to speak.

- David Ochs thanked the commission for denying the Proctor Crossing Critical Area Plan, which he believed would have caused stormwater runoff and destruction of wetlands.
- Michael Conte reminded the commission that rising property taxes were a strain on homeowners and urged no increases.
- Michael Hovland voiced concern about tax dollars going to Planned Parenthood. Lewis clarified that a resolution passed the previous year ensured no public funds went to abortion services.
- Martin Hyde returned to express his shock that no one had mentioned the assassination of Charlie Kirk and requested a moment of silence. He also criticized the doubling of the county budget over the last eight years. Commissioner Neunder thanked him for bringing up the death of Charlie Kirk and for the moment of silence.

Commissioner Neunder clarified that property assessments are handled by the Value Adjustment Board, not the commission, and that this hearing would not address property values. Then, the board passed several key resolutions:

- 2025-157: Stormwater assessment resolution for FY2026 was passed unanimously.
- 2025-158: Fire and Rescue District rates for FY2026 was passed unanimously.

- 2025-159: Non-ad valorem assessment rolls and rates were passed. Kimberli Radtke noted that millage rates were lower due to reduced debt millage from the Legacy Trail extension.

Commissioner Neunder warned that next year's hearing would focus on tightening the budget and protecting taxpayers. Finally, Resolution 2025-160, setting the countywide millage rate for FY2026, passed. On Resolution 2025-161 (the county budget totaling \$2,524,495,075), Commissioner Knight voted no, believing the budget was still too high. The other four commissioners voted yes, setting the final budget hearing for September 24, 2025.

This was one of the more stressful assignments I've undertaken. The tension in the room was palpable as commissioners debated financial decisions. As a public library employee, I now recognize the importance of responsible budgeting, especially in anticipation of future shortfalls. I've come away from this experience with greater respect for our county officials, who take their responsibility over public funds seriously even amid public criticism.

Table of Organization

The Board of County Commissioners sets policy and approves the budget for Sarasota County. They appoint the County Administrator, who manages the county's

daily operations. The Department of Libraries and Historical Resources is led by Director Renee DiPilato (Sarasota County Libraries, n.d.), who reports to Assistant County Administrator Brad Johnson, who in turn reports to County Administrator Jonathan Lewis, who answers to the Board of County Commissioners (Sarasota County Government, 2025, p. 34).

Basis of Taxation

According to Sarasota County's 2024 Impact Report, the General Fund is the primary operating fund and covers most county operations (Sarasota Clerk & Comptroller, 2025, p. 10). It is funded primarily through ad valorem (property) taxes, as well as impact fees, gas taxes, infrastructure sales tax, tourist development tax, mobility fees, and state revenue sharing (Sarasota County, 2025, p. 79).

Annual Operating Budget

The Sarasota County Library System's adopted operating budget for 2025 is \$20,195,155 (Sarasota County, 2025, p. 254). According to the Florida Division of Library and Information Services, the county's service area population is 479,201 (FL DLI, 2024), making the per capita funding \$42.14.

Budget breakdown:

- \$18,448,635 from the General Fund means \$38.50 per capita
- \$1,387,544 from the Library Gifts Fund means \$2.90 per capita
- \$320,000 from the Advanced Grants Fund means \$0.67 per capita
- \$38,976 from the Library Endowments Fund means \$0.08 per capita

Friends of the Library

I work at the North Port Library and am very grateful to the Friends of the North Port Library, who raise funds through donated books and DVDs at their bookstore. They're currently planning a November Book Sale and Bling Fling, where they'll sell books and costume jewelry. While they have limited online presence, their support is crucial to our programming—whether that's paying a yoga instructor or providing snacks for Movie Club. It's important to note that the Friends group is autonomous from the library. They don't hold authority over library decisions, and we don't influence their operations.

Other branches also have active Friends groups. The Friends of the Venice Library, for example, have an excellent website showcasing their fundraising efforts, calendar of events, and advocacy. They were formed in 1965 by the Venice-Nokomis Woman's Club to support the Venice Public Library (Friends of the Venice Library, n.d., para. 1). On a personal note, I'm deeply thankful to them for taking over funding for library employees pursuing their MLIS degrees.

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