

# As Riverside County ponders spending cuts, public outcry saves 4-H, Master Gardeners

Supporters turn out to successfully urge supervisors to support programs



Kevin Jeffries, First District, listens to a man as he holds up a copy of the Riverside County budget as he speaks during a hearing on the Riverside County budget Monday evening, June 10, 2019 at the County Administrative Center in downtown Riverside. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

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In the grand scheme of [Riverside County's \\$6.1 billion budget](#), a cut of \$562,000 is little more than a nick. But to the Master Gardeners and youths in the county's 4-H program, the idea of the county

spending less on UC Riverside's Cooperative Extension was a threat to something that they say enriches their lives.

Supporters of both programs turned out in big numbers Monday, June 10, to attend a public hearing on the county budget. And many in that audience, which included teens in green and white 4-H uniforms, cheered after the Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to restore the extension's funding, reversing a cut made as part of a larger plan to trim spending at a time when government expenses are rising faster than the county's tax receipts.

The Master Gardener program, which trains volunteers to share tips on backyard gardening and water-saving landscaping with the community, and 4-H, which uses farming and animal husbandry to teach leadership and life skills, are supported by UCR's extension, which receives almost \$700,000 annually from the county.

In recent years, county finances have been squeezed by rising pension obligations, higher costs for mandatory state programs and other new, ongoing and inflexible expenses. Supervisors are tasked with paying for those new costs while leaving the county's savings untouched, a move aimed at keeping interest rates on debt low and to keep money on-hand if a natural disaster or an economic downturn strikes.

To that end, officials scoured the budget looking for things to cut so funding for other priorities, especially public safety, could be saved. On the chopping block was funding for UCR's extension, which was set to be trimmed from \$674,064 to \$112,000 for the budget year starting July 1.

If that happened, everything the extension services does – from 4-H to nutrition and agricultural programs – would have been affected, said Eta Takele, the service's director.

County Executive Officer George Johnson said the county would work with the extension to save money by moving its offices from

leased office space to county-owned space. But 4-H members and Master Gardeners mobilized to show up Monday night and urge county supervisors not to cut funding.

Bethany Campbell, a four-year 4-H member from Murrieta, said the program has helped her overcome her shyness and gain confidence: “4-H helped me rise above fear and insecurity to become a leader.”

“It definitely saved me from getting into trouble,” said 17-year-old Samantha Teater, a 4-H member who traveled nearly three hours, from her home in Blythe, to testify at the Riverside hearing.

About 900 young people are enrolled in the 27 4-H clubs in Riverside County, and about 4,000 others are in 4-H after-school programs, according to the extension service.

Master Gardener volunteers talked about their work with schoolchildren and amateur green thumbs; they put in 27,000 hours a year valued at more than \$600,000, according to the county budget document. The extension’s work is vital in fighting crop diseases, said Greg Pennyroyal, a professor of viticulture at Mt. San Jacinto College and a vineyard manager at Wilson Creek Winery outside Temecula.

After he’d heard from more than two dozen speakers on Monday, Supervisor Chuck Washington announced he would not support cutting the extension’s funding. Another supervisor, Jeff Hewitt, praised the young people who spoke in support of 4-H.

“I think if we get this financially fit, why aren’t we helping expand these programs?” Hewitt said to cheers.

Supervisor Karen Spiegel said also spoke in support of the program, saying the money is well spent.

“We have to see what’s the most effective use of our dollars,” she said. “And as many of you addressed, we get dollars on a return. It’s not money out the door.”

It's not clear what cuts will be made instead. The county will consider other cuts, or dip into savings.



4-H club supporter Anita Pacheco, from Riverside, sits in an overflow council chambers during a hearing on the Riverside County budget Monday evening, June 10, 2019 at the County Administrative Center in downtown Riverside. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)