

choose to increase or decrease the rates depends on how much they have in savings and if new improvements are needed, said county Budget Director Steve Botelho.

The rate for the Siesta Key Public Improvement District, which provides for maintenance in Siesta Key Village, is considering increasing its tax by 63 percent.

Chris Brown, the owner of Hub Baja Grill and The Cottage Restaurant, has been in a legal dispute with the county over that particular tax assessment, as it has been found that several properties in the district were left off the tax rolls. He also has said the work the maintenance district is supposed to perform is not getting done.

"They want to increase my taxes?" said Brown. "I'm already paying \$9,000 a year and not getting anything."

The county has been using reserves to plug most of the holes in the operating budget caused by the loss of tax revenue. Next fiscal year, they will likely pull more than \$29 million in reserve funds to help finance the operating budget.

Commissioners are also considering a few million dollars in service cuts. The biggest impact would be on Sarasota County Area Transit fares, which would rise by 50 cents. Some library hours could also be scaled back and the inter-library loan system could be suspended.

with confidential sources, which will take a long time to review.

ly take more than a year to work through the court system.

USF Polytechnic opens doors to new students

By KIM WILMATH
St. Petersburg Times

LAKELAND — The new University of South Florida Polytechnic campus can now accept freshman and sophomore students for next year.

Polytechnic's approval from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is the first step in its quest for individual accreditation separate from the USF system. The system includes schools across the bay area that are autonomous in governing yet are all under the USF umbrella.

Two of those campuses now have separate accreditation — USF St. Petersburg and, most recently, USF Sarasota-Manatee.

Polytechnic's ability to take in lower undergraduates is the school's first push in that direction, said Polytechnic spokeswoman Samantha Lane.

"This was what we needed . . . so we can build that four-year experience for students," Lane said.

Prior to this week, Polytechnic accepted only juniors, seniors and graduate students. The Lakeland school focuses on "active, applied learning," primarily in technical disciplines. It currently has a little more than 1,200 students.

Lane said the school will likely begin accepting lower-level transfer students in the spring, but its recruiting focus will be on attracting freshmen for its inaugural class in fall 2012.

She did not yet know when the school expects to hear an answer about its accreditation application.

USF Sarasota-Manatee, which accepts only upper-level and graduate students, earned that status last month, joining USF Tampa and USF St. Petersburg as independent parts of the whole system.

USF Sarasota-Manatee also plans to begin recruiting a freshman class soon. The campus currently serves 4,500 students each year at its two locations: the main campus on the border of Manatee and Sarasota counties and in North Port.

USF is not the only entity with expansion on its mind. The Florida Board of Governors, which oversees the state's 11 public universities, is updating the university system's strategic plan, which has not had a reworking since 2005.

Potential changes include increasing graduate programs, rethinking each university's degree offerings and possibly building another university.

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