

STAGING SEASONS ON AREA STAGES

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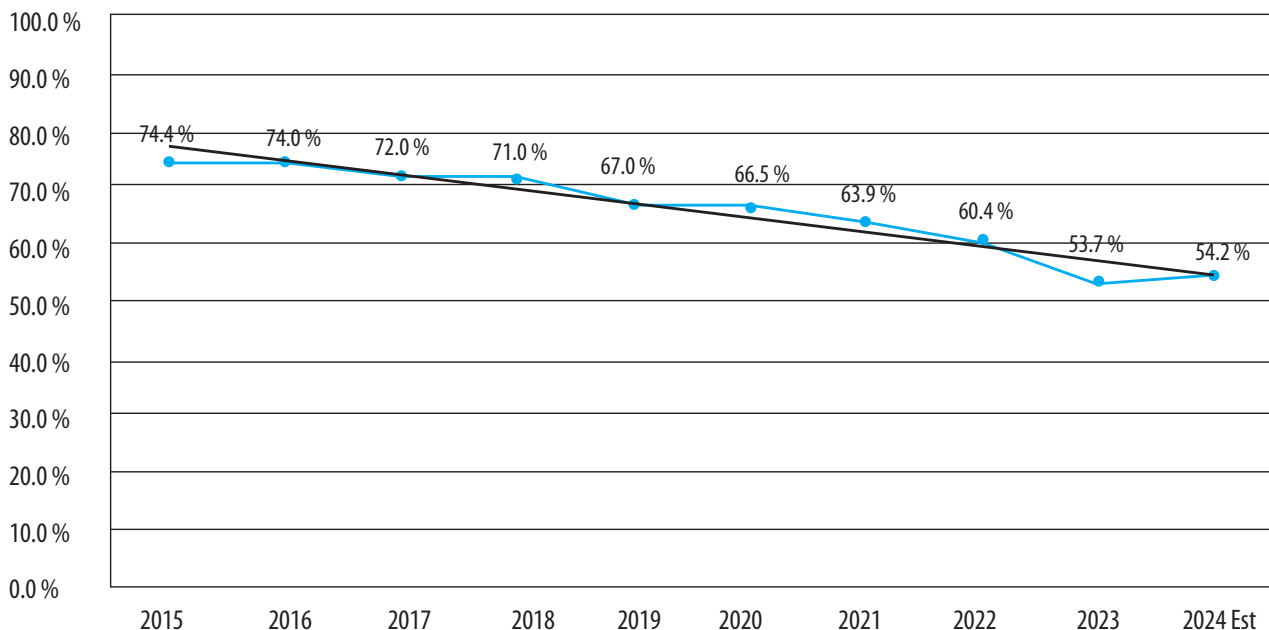


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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2023

HUTCHINSON'S 10-YEAR TAX TREND



Hutchinson's tax rate trend has decreased 20% during the past 10 years. The tax rate is determined by taking the city's tax levy and dividing it by its total tax capacity.

City scales back levy hike

Revenue, expense adjustments lead to 7.2% increase in new budget projection

BY JANEAN SORRELL
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For the second time in two weeks, the Hutchinson City Council reviewed its financial plans for 2024 and once again the public showed little interest.

The annual Truth-In-Taxation hearing last week drew a couple of residents and one business owner.

"The reason that hopefully you're here tonight ... is to enhance the public participation in the property tax system by allowing the public forum to discuss the proposed budget, proposed tax levies, talk about increase of or explain increases in the bulk of budget," City Administrator Matt Jaunich said.

The preliminary tax levy, initially sent out in September, proposed a city tax increase of 9.3%, with a balanced budget. However, revisions have been made, and the revised budget includes a 7.2% tax levy increase. This adjustment reflects changes in revenue and expense



Matt Jaunich

projections, resulting in the elimination of approximately \$178,000 in taxes since the adoption of the preliminary budget in September.

A home valued at \$250,000 will see a \$131 increase in taxes next year.

Jaunich compared Hutchinson to other cities in McLeod County, highlighting Hutchinson's position in property tax

rates. "Hutchinson had the second lowest tax rate in 2023," he said.

In McLeod County for 2023, Biscay had the lowest city property tax at 44.65%, Hutchinson was the second-lowest coming in at 53.65%, while Stewart had the highest property tax at 131.65%.

"One thing I do like to note because the question comes up is that the city taxes are extremely high and my question is compared to what or compared to who," Jaunich said.

2023 property tax rate

McLeod County cities property tax rate:

- 1) Biscay 44.37%
- 2) Hutchinson 55.65%
- 3) Winsted 65.57%
- 4) Glencoe 66.35%
- 5) Plato 68.71%
- 6) Lester Prairie 72.57%
- 7) Silver Lake 87.89%
- 8) Brownston 122.74%
- 9) Stewart 131.65%

When comparing 19 outstate regional centers for 2022, Hutchinson ranked in the middle of the pack with a 60.41% tax rate, dispelling the notion that the city's taxes are exceptionally

City Council to A2 >

Board approves 43% raise for county attorney

Commissioners vote 4-1 for increase, saying public defender salaries prompted the move

BY JANEAN SORRELL
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In what commissioners said was a response to state increases for public defenders salaries, the McLeod County Board approved a 43% pay increase for its county attorney.

Ryan Hansch, who was elected in November 2022, will see his salary jump from \$135,935 this year to \$195,000 for 2024.

The state and the union representing public defenders reached an agreement earlier this year for attorney's pay increases of 26% to 72% depending on seniority. The increases affect approximately 470 attorneys statewide and address longstanding wage stagnation issues that have led to high turnover and a significant pay disparity between public defenders and county-employed prosecutors, according to the state.

"Obviously, this is a shocker," Commissioner Doug Krueger said of the county attorney's pay jump. "It was shocking to me because of the short notice — in my words — of having to do this. This was triggered by the public defender office of the state of Minnesota, the public defender's salaries."



Ryan Hansch



Tim Langenfeld

As part of the tentative agreement, the salary for first-year public defenders will rise from \$70,146 to \$88,380. Senior attorneys, currently earning between \$91,917 and \$123,093, are expected to experience the most substantial salary increase, bringing their compensation to \$158,500.

McLeod County Administrator Shelia Murphy emphasized the longstanding issue of being behind in county attorney wages.

"Obviously, as a county, if somebody else raises your wages, you raise your wages. We can't do that," she said. "However, we have been behind in county attorney wages for a significant amount of time. We had to make a change in 2018 and review the job, and you

can only change so much at once. Sometimes we were pretty far behind the scale. When you look at the surrounding county attorney and assistant county attorney salary, sometimes we are not competitive, and especially in private practice."

County Attorney salaries for 2022 in counties of similar size were:

- Becker, \$122,025;
- Carlton, \$134,005;

- Steele, \$150,408;
- Mower, \$149,000.

Krueger defended the proposed increase, highlighting the disparity in salaries that could lead to a mass exodus of experienced attorneys. He expressed concern not just about the county attorney's wages but also about retaining the entire staff. The fear was that a failure to address the issue promptly might result in the department being split up, costing the county even more in the long run, he said.

Commissioner Nathan Schmalz questioned if years of experience were factored into the proposed salary structure.

"I would assume that it is embedded within that somewhat difficult on an elected position," board Chairman Paul Wright said. "I suppose as budget committee looked at this, I mean the biggest kicker that caused us to act so quickly was where the state definitely put such a significant increase that this is leading rural counties scrambling and then all companies scrambling more to keep up and it's very frustrating."

Wright mentioned the importance of maintaining current staffing levels, highlighting the efficiency of their lean staff compared to other counties.

"They're effective because of their years of experience and leadership that they have. So those are some of the other factors involved," Wright said.

The motion passed 4-1 with Schmalz voting

Attorney to A2 >

Surge in ag land values will lead to tax rate increases

County staff explain 30% rise in assessed market values during Truth-in-Taxation hearing

BY JANEAN SORRELL
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A market value study and state requirements mean some segments of McLeod County property values — especially agriculture — will see significant increases for 2024.

McLeod County Assessor Sue Schulz said during last week's Truth-in-Taxation hearing that taxes payable in 2024 underwent a sales ratio study to ensure their assessed values fell within the state-mandated 90% to 105% of market value.

"This is a state requirement, it's not a county policy," she said. "If we don't make those adjustments, the state comes in and does it for us. We are monitored by the Department of Revenue to make sure that we are doing what statute says that we should."

The study resulted in increases of 30% in agricultural property, 7% in residential property, 17% for apartments and 1% increase in commercial and industrial properties, she said.

Schulz noted the challenges, particularly in the agricultural sector, where ratios were lower than desired.

"Our agriculture is by far what I would term our worst," Schulz said. "Our ratios there were significantly lower than the 90% minimum that we were required to be at with

County Board to A2 >

Learning to lead

Hutchinson School Board's student representative takes initiative in shaping role for school community

BY KENDALL LARSON
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There isn't a guidebook to being a student representative for Hutchinson schools. Joel Wang, Hutchinson's student representative, is building his role from the ground up.

"There wasn't like a packet or a video for the student representative role," Wang said. "I think the idea of it is supposed to be student-driven."

Without a role model, Wang has made the position his own, using his position to talk about events and news at the school, such as TigerPath updates, as well as bringing a student voice to topics discussed at Hutchinson School Board meetings.

But Wang wanted more perspective on how he could be better at his role, so he attended the 2023 Student School Board Development Event hosted by the Minnesota School Board Association.

Student Rep to A4 >



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