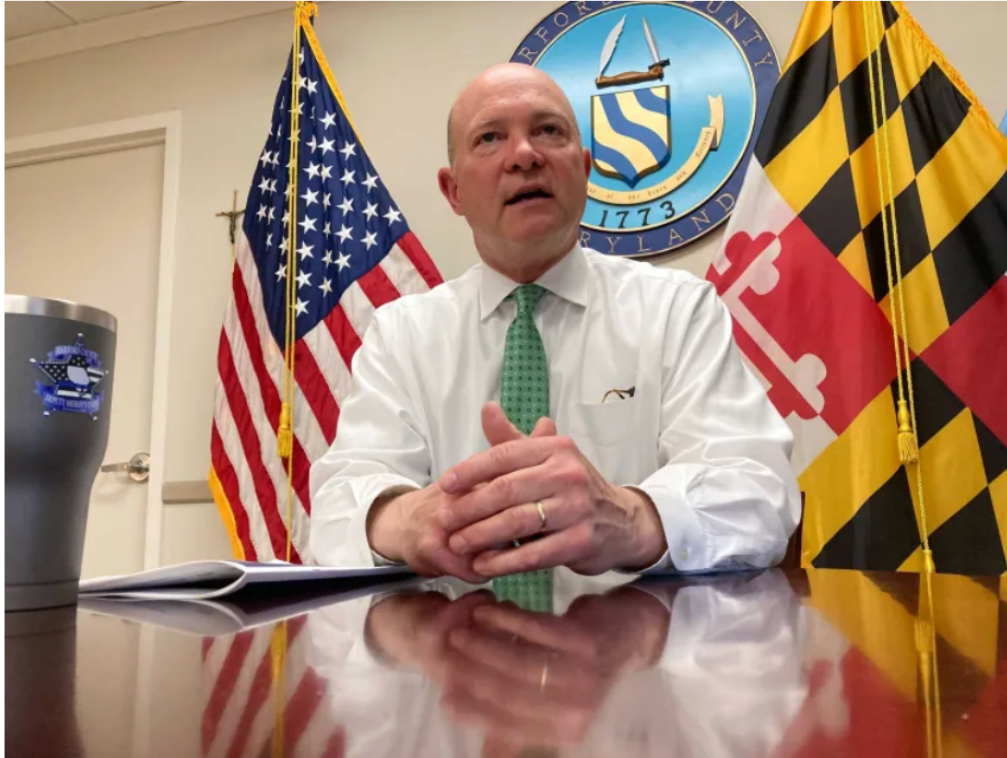


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## Harford County executive unveils \$1.23B budget proposal amid expected revenue shortfall

Schools officials upset \$40M of system's request not funded



Harford County Executive Bob Cassilly lays out the details of his proposed county budget Monday in his Bel Air office. (Dan Belson/Staff)



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Harford County Executive Bob Cassilly has released a \$1.23 billion proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year that holds most county spending flat.

The proposal comes after the first-term county executive warned that his fiscal 2025 budget would take a [tighter-fisted approach to spending](#) following an unexpected drop in income tax revenues in Harford and [across the state](#). The Republican pledged last month that despite the shortfall, he would not raise taxes.

The \$13 million shortfall led to the budget proposal taking a different direction than what Cassilly [teased in January](#) amid a rosier financial outlook. During his second State of the County address, Cassilly said his upcoming budget proposal would increase funding for the public school system by 5%. Those hopes have been dashed.

“We actually were coming really close to having a nice, smooth glide with the Board of Ed,” Cassilly said in a Monday interview. The hit on revenues “just smashed our whole outlook.”

In his Monday [budget letter](#), Cassilly blamed Maryland policies, such as the state’s minimum wage and taxes, as “a serious drag on our economy” leading to the loss of revenue. He also said the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future included mandates that were “straining local budgets statewide.”

**Cassilly’s proposal for the county’s education budget — which is more than half of the county’s general fund expenses and includes Harford County Public Schools as well as the public library and community college — is the same as what was approved for fiscal 2024. Cassilly said Monday that those agencies will have to use the unspent money they accumulated in reserves from prior years — which he said was about \$99 million on the part of the Board of Education.**

“I’m not going to the taxpayers and saying I have to do a tax increase when you’re sitting on \$99 million in excess taxes,” Cassilly said Monday. “I’m not telling them what they need to have. All I’m saying is you’ve got a big piggy bank sitting there with cash.”

But school district officials say Cassilly is overestimating their fund balance.

“If you want to know what somebody’s priorities are, look at their budget. This budget shows our county executive does not care about education,” Harford County Education Association President Chrystie Crawford-Smick said. “The cost of doing business has increased.”

Superintendent Sean Bulson said at a school board meeting Monday night that Harford County Public Schools needs an additional \$40 million to maintain current operations, which represents 80% to 90% of the district’s fund balance.

“There is nothing stored away anywhere else to draw on,” Bulson said at the meeting.

Bulson said the district was preparing to save money by eliminating athletic trainers, middle school sports and summer school, as well as cutting staff.

“There isn’t another [\$40 million] next year to replace it with. And if we don’t want to be looking at a list like this again and we don’t want to go deeper into this list, we’re going to have to really get people to understand how we want to fund public education in Harford County,” Bulson said.

In February, the school board approved a \$354 million school budget — a 7.7% increase over the current school year.

Overall, the total county budget as well as its general fund expenditures are proposed to increase by less than 1% each over what was approved for last fiscal year.

More than a quarter of the county executive’s proposed capital budget is set for education, as well, with \$66 million going toward new schools and facility upgrades. The budget includes more than \$23 million to replace the over-capacity [Homestead Wakefield Elementary School in Bel Air](#).

One county department that saw a significant increase in the budget proposal was the sheriff’s office, which is proposed to get more than \$8.7 million more than it was approved for last fiscal year.

The proposed budget will now go to the Harford County Council, which must approve a fiscal plan by June 15.

Cassilly’s last budget proposal was [initially met with sharp backlash, and was heavily adjusted](#) by the time it was signed. The two major problem areas with the last budget cycle were education, where Cassilly initially proposed \$19.4 million in cuts, as well as public safety, where [Republican Sheriff Jeff Gahler wrangled with him](#) on certain funding decisions.

Since taking the helm of the county executive’s office, Cassilly has [sparred with council members](#) — [two of whom](#) his administration has tried to have unseated — as well as Gahler, who has [clashed with the executive](#) over budget issues and become a part of other council infighting.

The friction between the sheriff and the county executive hasn't gotten better.

Asked about the latest budget proposal shortly after it was released Monday, Gahler said he and Cassilly had not spoken with each other in six to eight months. He said his agency was left out of the budget process, and he would have further to review the proposal with the department's budget director.

"Some people like myself aren't entitled, I guess, to any phone call," Gahler said. "The executive doesn't feel our position worthy enough, I assume."

Cindy Mumby, the county executive's chief of community relations, said the office had left a message for Gahler's budget director, and "followed up with an email including the sheriff's section of the budget." She said Gahler and the sheriff's office had stopped participating with the administration due to their clashes over a proposed sheriff's precinct and training center.

"Our door has always been, and will remain, open to resuming these collaborations in the interest of public safety," she said.

Gahler took issue with the training center not being included in last year's budget, or in this year's proposed capital spending. In 2021, the sheriff's office announced that it had [planned to repurpose an existing county facility in Aberdeen](#) to serve as a central precinct and training facility. In 2023, Cassilly [shelved the project](#).

*Baltimore Sun reporter Dillon Mullan contributed to this article.*