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## Nonprofits ask to keep pieces of pie

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By CHRIS HAMILTON, Staff Writer

WAILUKU - Advocates for local nonprofits came to the Maui County Council public budget hearing Wednesday night, and were coordinated both en masse with carefully prepared messages and as individuals with heartfelt pleas.

The annual requests to council members to support funding for nonprofit grants has become a familiar scene over the years come budget time, with advocates for various programs often packing the chambers. More than 40 people testified Wednesday.

This year is different, nonprofit advocates said. They are fighting for staff and even the continued existence of some social-safety-net, arts and environmental programs.

The predominant argument was that support for nonprofit services is needed now more than ever with a hurting economy.

Mayor Charmaine Tavares presented her \$572.5 million operating and capital improvement budget for fiscal year 2010 almost a month ago. Since then, council members have been trying to hash out a balanced budget before their May 31 deadline. Fiscal year 2010 begins July 1.

On Monday, council members will deliberate on how to dole out county funding to nonprofits.

"It's going to be a long day. A long day," County Council Budget and Finance Committee Chairman Joe Pontanilla predicted of Monday.

Pontanilla spoke Thursday while on his way to Lanai for the last of nine community budget meetings to gather public input on the county's spending priorities.

On Wednesday, the council heard from a couple dozen students who are members of Maui High School's auto-technology team or Maui Economic Opportunities Inc.'s Youth Services programs.

Award-winning and retired mechanics teacher Dennis Ishii called on council members to restore funding for the auto-technology program. The Tavares administration proposed reducing funding from \$100,000 this year to \$50,000 next year.

Vocational-studies programs are dying across America, but this program is a model with the county's help, Ishii said.

"These kids are not just learning about automobiles," he said. "We are developing individuals."

Tavares' proposed budget gives \$35.2 million to nonprofits that provide a host of services, including housing, meals for the less fortunate, early-childhood and after-school programs, transportation, economic development, water conservation and environmental protection. The mayor's proposed funding is a 7 percent reduction from the \$37.6 million budgeted in the current fiscal year, according to a spreadsheet prepared by the Office of Council Services.

Going into budget discussions as long ago as last summer, Tavares had asked nonprofits to lower their funding expectations by 10 percent from the current fiscal year. With the economy where it's at, Tavares said she wants to focus on core services, such as providing food, shelter, clothing and other basic needs.

For example, the Maui Food Bank would see no cut in its current \$200,000 grant from the county under the mayor's proposed budget. But one of the big losers would be the Maui Choral Arts Association, which would not have its \$25,000 grant renewed under Tavares' proposal.

Pontanilla said he agreed with the mayor's priorities.

If the council were to restore funding to some programs, it might be to something such as the elderly lunch program. The mayor's proposal calls for a 10 percent reduction, but that's 83,000 meals, he said.

"We just need to fund those kinds of programs," Pontanilla said.

While most nonprofits will see at least some cuts, many of those will be in the form of deferred equipment purchases or deferred capital improvements.

The county's largest nonprofit service provider, Maui Economic Opportunities Inc., is scheduled to receive about \$2.1 million less in funding than this year, said Sandy Baz, MEO executive director.

MEO provides transportation services for elderly, low-income and other residents, and it saw most of its proposed cuts, about \$1.9 million, come from new buses and the planned transit center. Baz said he's uncertain if the proposed budget cut would stall construction of the transit center.

In other testimony, Todd Abrams, an unemployed carpenter, said MEO Business Development Corp. helped him start his own small cleaning company. Maui Community College administrators said their nursing and dental programs produce jobs that are now in high demand.

Pontanilla said that as the county tries to balance its budget, it also is battling lawmakers who would balance the state's budget by raiding the counties' share of transient accommodations taxes. That funding source is expected to bring in about \$22 million this year to Maui County. Tavares' budget calls for the county receiving \$18 million in funding from the revenue source, also called the hotel room tax.