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Legal Services makes last minute plea for county funds

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Contributing Writer

A charitable organization that provides free legal assistance to low income Botetourt County residents made a last minute plea for \$1,559—a dollar for each of the low-income folks in Botetourt County—when the supervisors held a public hearing

April 13 on the county's proposed \$66.3 million budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

John Whitfield, executive director for Blue Ridge Legal Services Inc. (BRLS), said the nonprofit organization will cut staff if localities can't fund \$1 for every low-income resident. The organization is \$54,000

short this year due to state funding cuts and low interest rates and is asking the localities it serves for help.

Funding for BRLS comes from Legal Services Corporation, a federal grant, the Legal Services Corporation of Virginia, Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts, and United Way.

The nonprofit agency helps improv-

erished people with civil matters like landlord-tenant disputes, domestic problems, custody disputes, debt and bankruptcy, Whitfield said.

The group only serves folks who meet federal government poverty guidelines. Whitfield said of the county's 1,559 residents who meet

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that criteria, 96 came to the nonprofit group seeking assistance last year. Of those, 81 percent were women and 17 percent were elderly.

The organization is about "equal justice," Whitfield said.

The BRLS literature says it is committed to eliminating poverty-based inequities in the civil justice system by providing high-quality legal advice and representation to low-income residents in its service area.

The supervisors heard Whitfield's request but were noncommittal.

The only other concern about the county's budget came from R. David Wickline

of Troutville, who asked the supervisors to fully fund the school budget so that school bus drivers can receive additional health benefits.

During the public hearing, School Board Chairman Kathy Sullivan commended the supervisors for working with the school system on its budget and reaching a mutually acceptable amount of \$22.9 million in local funding.

She noted the school budget has several new positions, including two art teachers at the elementary school level.

After the meeting, Fincastle District Supervisor Don Meredith, who served with Valley District Supervisor Don Assaid on the school budget committee, commend-

ed Assaid for his "strong work and innovative thoughts" during the budgeting process.

"His ideas helped to assure the additional teaching positions requested, two (athletic) trainers, one at each high school, and he supported Code 107, which could possibly pave the way for insurance coverage" for additional employees, Meredith said.

Assaid was not at the budget hearing.

The supervisors will meet Thursday, April 28 at 3 p.m. for action on the budget. The supervisors are required by state law to tell the School Board before May 1 the minimum it will receive in the next fiscal year that starts July 1.