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rate for the first time in three years to stave off cuts to fire and library services and fund a plan to stop killing dogs and cats at the county's animal shelter.

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Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez on Tuesday proposed raising the property-tax rate for the first time in three years to stave off cuts to fire and library services and fund a plan to stop killing dogs and cats at the county's animal shelter.

The mayor's 2013-14 budget increases the overall tax rate by 5.37 percent, a hike Gimenez said would avoid fire station and public library closures and pay for the animal-welfare plan that nearly 65 percent of Miami-Dade voters approved in a non-binding ballot question in November.

The hike includes the separate portion of taxes that pays for construction projects voters approved in a major bond issue a decade ago, such as expanding the Florida exhibit at Zoo Miami.

In an unincorporated neighborhood such as Kendall, a homeowner with a taxable property value of \$200,000 would pay an additional \$102.52 in county taxes, which make up only a portion of a total tax bill. The higher fire and library rates would not affect residents of cities with their own fire or library services.

The county had faced a \$50.7 million general-fund budget hole, in addition to a \$15 million library budget shortfall and a \$15 million fire-rescue budget gap. Library and fire services are funded from property taxes separate from the general fund.

To close the general-fund gap, the county froze more than 1,500 vacant positions, used one-time money available from tourist dollars named convention development taxes and relied on higher projections from sales taxes and other revenues. But that

did not help plug the fire and library budgets, which had been bolstered the past two

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approve the budget that the mayor this time decided to suggest a tax-rate hike instead.

“I don’t believe the people of Miami-Dade County want to cut back on library services or fire services,” Gimenez said, noting that he expects his proposal to sustain the county for two years.

But while the higher tax rate would protect libraries and fire stations, it still could pose a political dilemma for commissioners, and will do nothing to stem conflict with the county’s labor unions over concessions that had been scheduled to expire next year.

Gimenez’s budget calls for workers to continue contributing 5 percent of their base pay toward health insurance costs and for extending other concessions. The county would otherwise have to cut about \$37 million from the general fund.

Most three-year union contracts provide for reopening certain provisions if the healthcare contribution is to continue past Jan. 1, 2014. The firefighters union is exempt because it has its own insurance.

Union chiefs have accused the county of carrying an unnecessary \$42 million surplus in its health-insurance trust fund, which the administration counters helps maintain benefits and hold the line against health-insurance rate increases in the future. Miami-Dade Clerk of Courts Harvey Ruvlin has agreed to conduct a financial audit of the fund at the unions’ request.

“We can’t figure out where is the end of this surplus account. What is it being built up for?” Terry Murphy, a public affairs consultant working for the unions, told the Miami Herald’s editorial board Monday.

The county has already declared an impasse over the concession provisions —

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Commissioner Esteban “Steve” Bovo suggested from the dais last month that some voters might not have supported the animal shelter ballot measure had it been binding. “They felt, ‘Well, it’s not going to raise my taxes — it’s only a straw-ballot question,’ ” he said.

Commissioners will meet next Tuesday to set the maximum tax rate, which they can lower but not raise later. They will vote on the budget after two public hearings in September.

The higher tax rate would be the first pushed by Gimenez, who took the reins after a frustrated electorate ousted former Mayor Carlos Alvarez in a recall prompted by Alvarez’s unpopular 12.4 percent tax-rate hike and employee pay raises in 2010.

In the budget he delivered in 2011 after taking office to complete Alvarez’s term, Gimenez reversed his predecessor’s handiwork and called for severe services cuts, layoffs and dramatic employee concessions. Last year, a month before his reelection bid for a full four-year term, Gimenez proposed further reducing the tax rate, while maintaining services and avoiding job losses.

For the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1, the overall budget would total \$6.4 billion, up from more than \$5.9 billion last year. That includes \$1.9 billion for construction spending, up from \$1.6 billion last year to pay for big-ticket projects such as upgrading sewer pipes as mandated by the federal government, rehabilitating the West and Bear Cut bridges on the Rickenbacker Causeway and dredging Port Miami.

The operating budget for day-to-day expenses, including salaries and services, amounts to \$4.4 billion, higher than last year’s \$4.3 billion.

No layoffs are proposed in the budget. Despite the frozen vacancies and the elimination of 219 positions, the county’s workforce would grow by 206 positions to

26,109 because some port security and parks maintenance jobs slated to be

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two years after that.

Public transit fares are also slated to increase to \$2.25 from \$2, following a commission-approved measure to tie ticket prices to the consumer-price index. Admission fees at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens would rise to \$18 from \$15.

Like last year, the budget plans for new classes of police officers (four) and firefighters (one) to make up for those who retire or leave the department. An additional 27 sworn police officers could be hired if the county receives a federal grant.

The budget also continues to boost funding for maintenance and programming at county museums and arts venues, including for the Miami Science Museum scheduled to open next year.

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