

Thanks to a hiring freeze, a penny-pinching staff and the postponement capital expenditures, McLean County made it through 2016 with a \$900,000 short fall. McLean County Auditor Leslie Korgel said this week that three factors came together at one time to create the short fall: lower coal severance and coal conversion tax collections and lower state aid. "2016 was a tough year," Korgel said. "Spending was down, and the staff watched expenses very well."

"2017 looks like it will be better than last year," Korgel said. "It looks like oil prices are going back up, and our power plants will be up all year. On the downside, though, it appears that state aid, based on sales taxes will still be down."

Meanwhile, McLean county residents are still experiencing good county services, especially from the road department. The county has been in or next to the winter storm bullseye more than once this winter. The 21 people in the County Highway Department have been racking up overtime; 20 equipment operators and one maintenance person. Korgel said the county contracted two private operators to help clear roads.

Businesses in the county have been negatively impacted by both the weather and by the oil economy. Oil field companies in the north and western parts of the county, such as in Garrison or Underwood have closed their doors. The weather closed restaurants on the worst days. Hardware stores, though have seen an uptick in business.

Korgel is optimistic about the 2017 tourism season. He thinks fishing enthusiasts will bolster local economies. Right now, ice fishing is a little slow as anglers wait until more of the lakes and rivers are frozen over.

He said he and other county officials are watching the 2017 legislature. There are two concerns, one is that as lawmakers look for budget cuts, it is important they do not cut funding for services that counties must then fund. The second concern is election equipment. "Many of our machines are very old and we don't want them to break down during an election. It's time to replace them," he said.

