

Loudoun Cuts Tax Rate; Average Bill Rises \$464

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Loudoun County became the first major Northern Virginia jurisdiction to address homeowner anxieties over rising assessments and tax bills by passing a tax rate cut yesterday of nearly 7 cents as part of a \$967 million operating budget.

In Loudoun, where supervisors yesterday passed a spending plan for the coming fiscal year that is 14 percent over this year's budget, the average tax bill will increase by \$464.

Loudoun is the nation's fastest-growing county, and officials said they have struggled to keep up with a burgeoning population, which has jumped from 86,000 in 1990 to about 247,000 today. Officials targeted the rising student population and public safety, including the sheriff's department and fire and rescue services, for the largest spending increases in their budget for fiscal 2006, which begins July 1. Other areas, such as social services, continue to lag, with long waiting lists for housing and mental health programs.

The operating budget for schools totaled \$651.7 million, \$7 million less than requested. Officials said Loudoun's growth made it tough to meet Fairfax's rate cut proposal. "They have a net 100 new students, and we have 3,500," said Loudoun County Administrator Kirby M. Bowers.

Staff writer Rosalind S. Helderman contributed to this report.