

OUR VIEW

Still seeking facts for sales tax initiative

The issue: County officials would like to extend the quarter-cent sales tax.

This editorial first ran in The De Soto Examiner on May 8.

Three months from the Aug. 5 referendum, it's too early to come down pro or con on Johnson County's proposed extension of the quarter-cent sales tax. If passed, the revenue from the tax will be used to build a juvenile detention center and a crime lab for the Johnson County Sheriff's Office and provide funding for the ongoing operation of county correctional facilities. A third of the tax revenue will be distributed to county cities.

In truth, the county commission spent two years preparing to ask voters for use of its last remaining sales tax authority when in 2002 the county's large school districts hijacked the process during the state funding crisis in the post 9/11 economic downturn. Recognizing the importance of education to the county and acknowledging the districts could legally force a referendum, county commissioners supported the measure in 2002 and again in 2005 with some grumbling about the county's future needs.

Six years later, it's the county commission's turn. It's a safe prediction the proposal will have a much more difficult time than its two predecessors, which both passed with more than 60 percent of the vote. The organizational advantage and advocacy school groups gave those two measures will be absent this time.

It will mostly be the job of county commissioners and Johnson County Commission Chairman Annabeth Surbaugh to make the case for the tax. They will argue it is either a sales tax or a property tax increase. Moreover, they will make the case the former will be paid in part by residents of other counties but the latter will not.

Surbaugh also will have much to say about changing the criminal justice system in the county so that petty, non-violent criminals are punished in ways other than expensive jail time.

At a recent De Soto City Council meeting at which an endorsement of the extension was discussed, City Administrator Pat Guilfoyle said he couldn't say how much revenue the city received from the tax because that revenue couldn't be separated from other county sales tax numbers.

In a time of economic uncertainty, it will take all the persuasion of county commissioners to get voters to accept a tax with no sunset. It would serve them well to have all the facts ready for the argument.