

This is no sunset sandwich

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If a slice of bread were the beginning of a tax, and another slice of bread were the end of that tax, otherwise known as a sunset, what you would have would be a tax sandwich.

A tax sandwich is quite desirable when what taxpayers are going to eat is a specific project that, when all is said and done, satisfies the appetite. If voters decide to eat more later, they then can vote in another sandwich or make the same sandwich again.

A perfect case for such a sunset sandwich was the 1996 bistate tax to restore Union Station. The tax had a beginning, the project had an end, and, three years later, so did the tax. Voters were later presented with another proposed bistate sandwich and decided they had had their fill and voted it down.

But some tax proposals are not like a sandwich at all. Rather, they are like the water that is kept flowing through the faucet, because the thirst is never quenched.

Critics of a proposed public safety tax in August say their chief complaint is that the tax has no sunset. They want a public safety sandwich tax they can eat and then be done.

But that makes no sense. The tax dollars must continually flow to fund ongoing operations of a jail expansion, a crime lab and juvenile detention facilities with costs that will go on and on and on, just like gulping water. The need will never, ever end, because crime will never end, and the number of inmates will never shrink. If anything, it will grow.

Most county operations are funded by a mill levy on property, not a sales tax, such as the one proposed in August. Those mill levies have no sunset. They never end, unless a majority of the County Commission votes to reduce the levy. But then, technically, a sales tax with no sunset can be repealed by voters. Neither of course, will likely ever happen, because operational costs do not go down.

The county currently has a half-cent sales tax without a sunset for general revenue, and there is another quarter-cent sales tax that never ends that funds ongoing operations from our previous jail expansion, approved in 1995.

Overland Park has a 1-cent sales tax without a sunset for ongoing operations. Lenexa also has a 1-cent sales tax with no sunset for its general fund. So, does Olathe.

What is the logic of putting a sunset on an expense that never ends?

Should we have a sunset on our Social Security taxes? Should we have a sunset on our school taxes? Should we have a sunset on federal income taxes that go to support, among other things, our national defense? Should we have a sunset on gasoline taxes that keep our roads maintained? And what about our ongoing taxes to keep up our local parks?

Don't be suckered in by those who would tell you a jail tax can be a nice, neat sandwich with a specific end. Our appetite for keeping criminals off the street will never be satisfied. And what, pray tell, would we do with a jail full of a thousand criminals if the tax did suddenly end?

The sunset hysteria, in this case, is all emotion. It sounds good, but a sunset for ongoing public safety costs would be a recipe for disaster.