

Public has mixed feelings on sales tax renewal

(The Olathe News (Olathe, KS)(KRT) Via Acquire Media NewsEdge) Jul. 25--
John Hutchinson is a convert.

Only two weeks ago, the Overland Park retiree opposed the renewal of the Johnson County sales tax to be used for public safety projects.

It took a visit to the county's overcrowded, 12,000-square-foot crime lab in Mission, a meeting with County Manager Mike Press and a public information session Tuesday to change his mind. When he casts his vote Aug. 5, he'll support the tax renewal.

For him, it's an easy choice. His property taxes won't go up, and he figured that he's already paying the sales tax -- albeit for a different purpose.

"There's no added pain," he said.

The tax would generate about \$18.9 million a year to ease the county's public safety woes. It would pay for the ongoing 554-bed expansion of the county's jail near Gardner, build a new 51,000-square-foot crime lab and a new juvenile services complex. It also would convert the downtown Olathe jail to a booking facility.

The cities would split about \$10.6 million annually from the revenue. They don't have to dedicate their share of the tax to public safety.

Annabeth Surbaugh, chair of the County Commission, has said that if the tax doesn't pass, property taxes would go up. The benefit of a sales tax would be that visitors to the county would help generate the revenue. Visitors account for about 30 percent of retail spending in the county.

Many of the other 30 people who attended the informational meeting didn't share Hutchinson's opinion.

Opponents say the tax, which has been renewed twice since 2002 for funding dedicated to the county's school districts, has several problems:

--It's a new tax, opponents say. "It's not a renewal," Olathe resident Char Bredemeier said. "If it was, it would be continually going toward schools. That is propaganda by using the word renew."

Surbaugh said, however, that the last tax, which was passed in 2005, included

ballot language that dedicated the remainder of the funding "if any, to be used for public safety purposes and for capital projects of the county."

--It never sunsets. "There are no checks and balances," said Pat McKinney, a Lenexa resident. "If this tax goes on into infinity, there's no oversight with operating costs... It's an open checkbook." Surbaugh said commissioners would direct future funding as needed.

--The ballot language is vague, opponents say. "I just think it's very misleading," said Mike Jenkins of Shawnee. "I think on your part, not being offensive, it's a good move because people won't realize they're renewing the school tax." Surbaugh said that nowhere does the ballot language say anything about schools, which knew they would give up the revenue after it passed the last time.

--There are alternatives, opponents say. Former Shawnee councilmember Tracy Thomas said Sheriff Frank Denning got a 10-year, quarter-cent sales tax proposal approved by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius.

Denning said he doesn't have the authority to place a tax on the ballot. That's up to county commissioners, he said, and they didn't think a 10-year tax would meet the county's needs.

--Cities can do whatever they want with the tax, opponents argue. "There is no enforceable provision as to where that money will go...," said Lenexa resident Steve Schute. "We don't know what the accountability for the cities is." Surbaugh said Schute's argument was accurate. State statutes don't require that cities place their intentions for tax revenue on a ballot.

--Property taxes will increase anyway, opponents also say. Schute said the county's 2009 budget doesn't include a mill levy increase, so if the tax doesn't pass, property taxes wouldn't rise next year.

But they could and likely would in the future.

Scott Neufeld, the county's budget director, said that was accurate. The county raised property taxes three-quarters of a mill in 2006 to generate about \$6 million a year to fund the beginning of the jail expansion. Property taxes could increase again, he said, but without the tax the county has no funding contingency for the crime lab.

Residents who said they understood the county's need for new or expanded public safety facilities weren't easily swayed by the answers they received Tuesday.

"I agree, you need a jail, you need the crime lab, and we need juvenile intake center..." said Shawnee resident Jeffrey Jenkins. "This is backroom stuff, man."

This is not right. This is not right." To view the ballot language, visit www.jocogov.org/salestax/language.htm.

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