

## Turner explains county sales tax

Written by Ty Albin, The Lawton Constitution  
Tuesday, 29 April 2014 04:34 -

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Comanche County commissioners are asking voters to approve a renewal of the existing 1/8-cent county sales tax to benefit county agencies, the other existing 1/8-cent sales tax to benefit the Comanche County Detention Center and a new 1/8-cent sales tax to help pay for the increasing costs of running the detention center when they go to the polls June 24.

Gail Turner, chairman of the commissioners, spoke to the editorial board of The Lawton Constitution about the sales tax proposal last week and explained how it will work.

The single ballot proposal is for a 3/8-cent sales tax that will combine the existing sales taxes set to expire this year and next, with the new 1/8-cent sales tax that will be dedicated to paying for jail expenses.

The new 3/8-cent sales tax would take effect Jan. 1, 2015, and run through Dec. 31, 2021.

### Splitting up the new tax

The new tax would also make slight changes as to how the current tax to benefit county agencies will be split.

The jail will receive 1/4 cent of the proposed 3/8-cent sales tax. Currently, it receives only the existing 1/8-cent sales tax that is dedicated to the jail.

The Industrial Development Authority currently receives 54 percent of the existing county 1/8-cent sales tax. It will receive 48 percent of 1/8 of the new sales tax.

The Comanche County Fairgrounds currently receives 15 percent of the existing 1/8-cent sales tax. It will receive 17 percent under the new sales tax.

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The volunteer fire departments, which currently get 14 percent of the existing tax, will receive 16 percent of the county's portion of the new tax. With the addition of Valley View Fire Volunteer Department last year, there are now 19 volunteer fire departments in the county to split the tax revenue.

The capital improvement fund currently gets 9 percent of the existing tax. It will receive 10 percent.

And the sheriff's department, which gets 8 percent of the current tax, will get 9 percent.

Turner said people underestimate the importance of the volunteer fire departments, which serve as the first responders on fire, emergency and medical calls throughout most of the county. Volunteer firefighters are quasi-professionals who must pass extensive training programs in order to serve, he said.

He also stressed the importance of improving and maintaining the fairgrounds, which hosts numerous community events. Turner said the rent charged by the fairgrounds does not cover those costs and the money must be found elsewhere.

As for the new 1/8-cent sales tax to benefit the jail, Turner said it is a necessity. The cost of daily operations for the jail have continued to go up over the years and revenue for extra bed space has gone down, he said.

The cost of food and other daily necessities has gone up. The cost of feeding inmates has gone up 60 percent since 2008, Turner said.

The number of inmates being incarcerated from the local area has also increased.

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The jail originally had about 260 beds, of which 100 were used to generate revenue by renting them out to the state and federal governments to house their prisoners. That revenue was used to support daily operations of the jail.

However, as more prisoners have come in from Comanche County, there are fewer beds that can be rented. Turner said there are only about 50 rentable beds in the jail now.

He said the existing 1/8 cent sales tax that supports the jail is not enough to make up the difference.

The jail has been operating out of revenue generated by the tax that constructed the jail for several years and that account is now completely depleted as of the end of April, Turner said.

Turner said the county will most likely have to consider canceling its current 44-bed contract to house Oklahoma Department of Corrections inmates for \$27 each per day and the existing contract with the federal government to house five to 10 inmates at a rate of \$52 each per day because there isn't enough room and the cost of housing one inmate is actually about \$33 per day.

Turner acknowledged getting people to approve a sales tax increase to fund the jail will be a tough sell, but said it is important.

"Every time you turn on the the TV or open the newspaper, people are getting shot or robbed," he said. "We need to be able to lock them up."