

Fair board says sales tax election critical

Written by Mitch Meador, Lawton Constitution
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Proposals on the June 24 ballot to renew two county sales taxes are important to operating the Comanche County Fairgrounds at the level it is now, Executive Director Phil Humble said at the monthly meeting of the Comanche County Fairgrounds Trust Authority on Monday.

One of the sales taxes is for operation of the Comanche County Detention Center, while the other is divided among volunteer fire departments in the county, the sheriff's office, county capital improvements, the Comanche County Industrial Development Authority and the fairgrounds. Humble, in his capacity as mayor of Chattanooga, said about half the runs the local fire department makes are for medical reasons, not for property.

Some of the capital improvements made at the fairgrounds because of the tax were the repainting of the perimeter fence to keep it from rusting; new ovens, water heaters and dishwashers in the catering kitchen; new lighting and ceiling in the Prairie Building as well as painting the exterior; purchase of 100 chairs used for catering; upgrading the Great Plains Coliseum restrooms and painting the hallways and interior, and installing new lighting in the Coliseum.

“Without that tax we would not have been able to do that,” Humble said. “That tax represents about one-fifth of our budget, so it's critical for us to continue that to be able to operate as we are.”

The fairgrounds is a community asset that draws more than 70,000 people a year to more than 150 events, and it has an economic impact, he added.

Also Monday, the fair board voted 8-0 to give the Lawton Crafters Art and Hobby Association a oneyear price break on its three-day show.

The regular rate for the Expo Building where the show is held has been raised from \$900 a day to \$1,200 a day. Bill Brown, a representative of the association, had asked the fair board to keep it at the old rate due to the association's 30-year history at the fairgrounds and the fact that

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the money it raises goes to nonprofit organizations like the J. Roy Dunning Children's Shelter and the Greiner School for the Handicapped.

Chairman Ken Price suggested raising the rent to \$1,050 a day this year and going to \$1,200 next year. Trustee Ronnie Love made the motion, and Trustee Ike Higdon seconded. Trustee Albert Johnson Jr. was absent.

On another item, Humble said he has asked designer Wendy Tatroult to come up with plans for modifying one of the entrances to the Coliseum Annex. He asked her to stay within \$35,000 on the project and give the board two options, a smaller one for the double doors on the south side and a larger one for the overhead door, also on the south side. Her fee for the designs will be \$1,500.

Trustee Mollie Burton said she feels the fairgrounds has more important priorities than an entryway, but Higdon said he respectfully disagrees and moved to go forward. The vote was 6-2 with Burton and Trustee Mike Hannabass voting no.

A proposal to install ceiling fans with 24-foot-long blades in the Expo Building stirred up discussion. Humble said he has three price quotes, one for a six-bladed fan to be installed at a cost of \$26,385 and the other two for eight-bladed fans that would move more air. One costing \$36,855 has a 15-year warranty and a sidemounted motor that could be replaced more easily when it goes out. The other, which Humble prefers, is \$30,985 for a 10-year warranty.

Price said his concern is that the board needs to look at bringing electricity in the Expo Building up to code before installing the fans, and Love and Trustee David Dorrell agreed, although Love is opposed to the fans and Dorrell is in favor. Humble said the board has been talking about the project for a couple of years.

"If we put the fans in that building, we increase the useability of that building. We increase our competitiveness ... so longterm, I definitely think the principle is something we need to pursue," Humble said.

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Ultimately, a motion by Trustee Mark Henry to move forward on the fans passed, 8-0. Humble said the next logical step is to review the electrical wiring and see if it would be adequate for the installation of the fans and come up with a price of what it would take in additional costs to wire the fans.

Installation of heaters in the Expo Building was tabled because Humble is still awaiting information from Wichita Mechanical and an item to move the walk-in freezer from the Prairie Building was tabled because he's awaiting specific information from the Lawton Fire Department.