

County talks jail funds

Written by Ty Albin, The Lawton Constitution

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A light agenda provided an opportunity for the Comanche County commissioners to discuss jail funding issues Monday.

While there were no regular action items on the agenda, Western District Commissioner Don Hawthorne requested that two items be pulled from the consent agenda, which is the slate of routine business items the commissioners usually approve with a single vote. Both items related to jail funding issues. The wrong financial figures were listed in each item and Hawthorne needed to correct them before they were approved.

One, as corrected, was to take \$136,828.25 from the Jail Sales Tax Revolving Fund to pay for operating the Comanche County Detention Center in the month of June.

The other, as corrected, transferred \$67,501.75 from the county Contingency Fund to the jail to cover the shortfall for June operations.

Hawthorne said the increasing cost of operating the jail over the last few years, combined with less revenue from renting beds to house state and federal prisoners because of an increased county inmate population, has depleted the savings the county has been using to operate the jail.

Hawthorne also said there is some concern about whether or not it is legal to use county property tax revenue, such as the money in the Contingency Fund, to pay for a facility that is housing some state and federal prisoners, such as the Comanche County Detention Center.

Hawthorne said there may have been an attorney general's opinion issued concerning a similar situation in Bryan County, but the county has little choice because it is required by the Oklahoma Constitution to operate a jail.

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The commissioners are asking voters to approve another 1/8-cent county sales tax to pay for daily operating costs at the Comanche County Detention Center in the June 24 special election.

If passed, the measure would also renew and consolidate the existing 1/8-cent sales tax that helps fund a number of county agencies and the existing 1/8-cent sales tax that helps with the operation of the detention center.

The new tax would be a combined 3/8-cent sales tax that would benefit the jail, the county Industrial Development Authority, the county fairgrounds, the 19 volunteer fire departments that serve the rural parts of the county, the county's capital improvement fund and the Comanche County Sheriff's Department.

If voters approve the proposal, the 3/8-cent sales tax will be effective Jan. 1, 2015, through Dec. 31, 2021.

In other business, the county also recognized the retirement of Carmen Zinno, deputy court clerk, who is stepping down after 28 years with the county.