

Voters will decide on sales tax

Written by Ty Albin, The Lawton Constitution
Monday, 23 June 2014 06:46 -

Voters will decide Tuesday whether to approve a 3/8-cent county sales tax that combines two existing 1/8-cent sales taxes with a new 1/8-cent sales tax to pay for the rising cost of operating the Comanche County Detention Center.

Gail Turner, chairman of the Comanche County commissioners, said the new combined tax is a necessity that will benefit everyone.

The new 1/8-cent sales tax that will fund the jail along with the renewal of the existing 1/8-cent sales tax the jail already receives is a result of more crime and rising costs for food, fuel and other necessities, Turner said.

He said the county is required by state law to operate a jail, and increasing crime in Lawton and the county as a whole has led to more inmates in the county jail. More local inmates in the jail means there are fewer beds the county can rent to the state and the federal governments to help pay for the operation of the jail.

While those rental revenues have declined in recent years, the daily expenses of housing and feeding inmates have risen, Turner said. He said the current 1/8-cent tax is not enough to cover the cost of operating the jail, even though he said the county has been frugal with taxpayers' money.

Turner said the daily cost per inmate at the detention center is \$32.50, which is significantly lower than many other jails in Oklahoma. He said the Grady County and Oklahoma County jails pay about \$41 per inmate daily.

As for the rest of the combined 1/8-cent sales tax, he said it will benefit important county agencies, including the Comanche County Industrial Development Authority, the sheriff's

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department, the fairgrounds and the volunteer fire departments; all of which, except for the development authority, will receive a larger cut of the combined tax than they receive of the current sales tax.

Turner also said the county is proud of its stewardship of tax money. The money in the combined tax is strictly earmarked for its specified purposes and cannot be spent any other way, he added.

The combined sales tax would help contribute to the economic well-being of Comanche County, Turner said.

“This is a necessity for the growth of our community,” he said. “If we aren’t growing, we’re dying.”

Phil Humble, executive director of the Comanche County Fairgrounds, said if the combined tax is approved the fairgrounds will see an allocation increase of about \$25,000 annually.

He said the money would be useful for projects like upgrading the electrical wiring in the exposition center and purchasing needed equipment like a forklift, or possibly helping fund projects to improve the annex building.

Dale Windham, chief of the Cache Volunteer Fire Department, said the tax would help pay the ever-increasing costs of operating his department, which responds to fires, vehicle accidents and medical emergencies over about a 100-square-mile area, in addition to providing assistance to other Comanche County volunteer fire departments as needed.

The tax would help pay for equipment like firefighting foam, which he said the department uses on both wildfires and structure fires. Windham said the department might use around 10 gallons

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of foam on one typical wildfire, which cost about \$300.

The chief said every time his department answers a call, it must dispatch two or three trucks. The Cache Volunteer Fire Department averages about five runs a day, he said — and the cost for fuel for those runs has gone up significantly over the last five years.

Windham's department also must be fully stocked on supplies for when it is called out to medical emergencies.

"I spend more than \$500 a quarter on oxygen tanks," he said.

If the combined tax passes, Windham said, each individual volunteer fire department can expect an additional \$10,000 in revenue.

Comanche County Sheriff Kenny Stradley said the current sales tax is what supplies his department with vehicles. If the combined tax passes, Stradley said, it will help his department keep its fleet current, which means his deputies will be better able to protect the public.

"It's a win-win situation for everyone," Stradley said.

Western District Comanche County Commissioner Don Hawthorne said there will be problems with budgeting if the combined tax doesn't pass. He said the Oklahoma Constitution requires the county to operate the jail as a priority. With current shortfalls, he said, the money to keep the jail operating at the standards required by law would have to be found elsewhere in the county budget if the tax proposal fails. That would mean serious cuts in other county agencies, he said.

Hawthorne said the fate of the proposed combined sales tax will greatly influence the county budget, which the commissioners are required by law to have in place by the end of August.

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Sales tax facts

Comanche county officials are asking voters to approve a revised county sales tax Tuesday to help pay for county operations. Here is how it would work:

q The new 3/8-cent health, safety and development tax would continue the existing 2007 1/8-cent sales tax that is distributed between the Comanche County Industrial Authority, the county fairgrounds, the volunteer fire departments, the county capital improvement fund and the Comanche County Sheriff's Department. That tax is set to expire Dec. 31 if the new combined tax is not passed.

q The new combined tax would also continue the existing 2008 1/8-cent sales tax that helps pay for the operation of the Comanche County Detention Center. That tax is set to expire Dec. 31, 2015, if the new combined tax is not approved by voters. q The new combined tax would also include a new 1/8-cent sales tax to help fund the detention center, bringing the jail's portion of the new tax to 1/4 cent.

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

q The new tax would also make slight changes as to how the current tax to benefit county agencies will be split. 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 cent under the new 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. 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 of the 1/8 cent.