

Jail tax extension on the ballot

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Larimer County voters will be asked in this election to adopt a 0.375 percent sales tax to fund operation of the Larimer County Jail. The sales tax will replace a current sales tax of 0.4 percent set to expire soon. Half of the 0.4 percent sales tax was used to fund construction of the justice center and other facilities. That tax will expire at the end of 2012. The other half of the tax will expire in 2014. The new sales tax will sunset in 15 years.

County government in Larimer County includes three Republican County Commissioners and a Republican Sheriff. Naturally, that means that the only formal opposition to extending the sales tax has come from Democratic Party activists. They've formed a campaign committee called Jail is Not the Answer. Supporters of the ballot issue have formed a committee called Citizens for Keeping Public Safety First.

Since the recession began, flat and declining county revenue has resulted in reductions in county services. The county cut 50 employee positions, including 16 staffers cut from the sheriff's office.

Staff cuts have changed the way the jail operates, mandating greater efficiency. The jail has found ways to reduce costs. For example, inmates now provide an estimated \$2 million worth of labor each year for cooking, cleaning and laundry services at the jail.

Jail costs are driven first by incarceration rates. In 2005, the average daily jail population was 513. By 2010, daily population dropped to 469. Pretrial services and alternative sentencing are two methods used to reduce incarceration. More people are being released to pretrial services rather than being required to post bond. More offenders are sentenced to work release, home detention or public service, rather than given jail sentences. Alternative sentencing also helps ensure nonviolent offenders are able to keep their jobs in a difficult economy.

Some vocal critics of pretrial services contend the program isn't working. The evidence to date suggests otherwise. In 2005, the percentage of inmates awaiting trial at the County Jail was 60%. Pretrial Services has helped reduce that percentage to 40%. Gary Darling, who heads the Larimer County Division of Criminal Justice Services, says that failures to appear for court used to run at 12-14%. That rate has been reduced to less than 2%. A common sense county program places calls to remind people of their court dates. That means far fewer people arrested on "failure to appear" warrants in Larimer County.

Some opponents of the tax extension would prefer a sales tax devoted to a new mental health facility. A similar proposal for a mental health facility tax increase failed miserably in the 2008 election. Larimer County does support mental health programs to ensure jail doesn't become a substitute for access to adequate treatment.

Another objection is that sales tax money dedicated to the jail will simply allow the county to spend money elsewhere. County government has moved to outcome-based budgeting. The process involves scoring various county services, including through public surveys, to determine what services merit priority. For example, operation of the County Jail and roadway maintenance both score as high priorities. Lower priority services such as the building department have already experienced major cuts.

County Commissioner Steve Johnson believes the county will be in real budgetary trouble if the sales tax ballot question fails, with a projected budget gap of \$7 million or more. The general fund budget is about \$101 million. Recent county layoffs and cost-saving measures are expected to save taxpayers \$20.7 million over the next five years.

Voters are left to decide whether further cuts are possible without damaging services. I haven't seen any concrete proposals for how the County would function with the sales tax expiring on top of property tax declines. I am therefore inclined to vote yes.

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