

Douglas County may seek sales tax increase for law and justice budget

by Dee Riggs | June 4, 2013, 9:45 p.m.

WATERVILLE — Douglas County residents may vote Aug. 7 on a sales tax increase that would prop up a lagging law and justice budget.

Douglas County Commission Chairman Ken Stanton said Thursday that he expects the three commissioners to vote on Monday or Tuesday to put the measure on the ballot. It would add 0.2 percent onto the existing sales tax.

Since a 0.1 percent sales tax is already in place and earmarked for law and justice, the additional tax would boost the sales tax for law and justice to 0.3 percent. That 0.1 percent tax has been in effect for about 14 years.

Douglas County's sales tax is currently at 8.1 percent. If approved, the additional tax would go into effect Jan. 1.

"Revenues are just not keeping up with expenses in the criminal justice portion of our budget," Stanton said. In particular he noted that the sheriff's office is down two deputies from 2008, but he said, the budget also pays for the entire court system, including the prosecutor's office, the public defenders and incarceration.

"We are down to a law enforcement force almost the size of East Wenatchee's, yet we patrol the whole county," Stanton said.

The Sheriff's Office now employs 27 deputies, including the sheriff, and seven non-uniformed employees.

He said commissioners have been considering asking for a sales tax increase for the past two years, as revenues have not kept up with expenses.

"We are limited (by state law) to a 1 percent increase in property tax, however, if you look at salaries and wages and health-care costs going up 2.5 to 3 percent a year due to labor negotiations, that explains why we go backwards every year," Stanton said.

"If you go back the last three to five years with this, it adds up."

He noted that commissions are heading into labor negotiations and "we've told the unions that the money's just not there. It's going to be tough."

Commissioner Dale Snyder said the sales tax measure is expected to raise \$933,203 in 2013. Sixty percent of that, or \$559,922, would go to the county. Forty percent would be distributed to cities and towns, based on population. East Wenatchee would get \$275,908 of that because it is the largest city in the county.

The amount of the county's law and justice budget for this year was not available. Commissioners did not have the figure and the official in the Auditor's office who has those figures was not available.

In recent weeks, commissioners have met with officials from Rock Island, Bridgeport and Waterville. Stanton said those councils seemed to be receptive to the tax increase. Votes by city councils are not required for the measure to go on the August ballot. The measure needs a simple majority to pass.

Stanton said county commissioners hope the recent vote to bail out the Town Toyota Center will not affect the outcome.

"I am optimistic that, if we can convince the voters that there is a need and the money will be used to improve law and justice, they will approve it," Stanton said.

He said commissioners plan to set up meetings where the public can comment on the proposal. No dates have yet been set.

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