

**'I have put myself  
out on the line to  
save the people.'**

**— County Commissioner  
Faye Stewart**

## FOR WHAT?

What will the county spend the \$32.5 million in flat tax revenue on?

There's considerable confusion on that question due to a mixed message from county officials. County officials describe the tax as "dedicated" to public safety services by the companion charter amendment, Measure 20-130. But at the same time, county officials argue that passage of the tax will fund social services for disabled children and adults and the poor and fund the animal pound, parks, veterans and 4-H programs.

How can this be? By funding public safety programs now paid for by property taxes, the income tax would free up revenue to pay for the other programs. So once in the county funding pot, the dedicated tax isn't, in effect, so dedicated.

Sorenson says the mixed message was intentional. The idea was that conservatives want a tax dedicated to law enforcement while liberals also want money to go to social programs, according to Sorenson. To appeal to both groups, tax supporters are delivering different, apparently contradictory messages to different audiences, he said.

But Sorenson said the confusion only hurts the measure. "Both groups are saying, no, that's disingenuous," Sorenson said. "All that does is fuel the view that they're not being straight with people."

A backlash against a misleading measure last November to increase taxes with a measure titled to "limit" taxes contributed to its defeat, Sorenson said. The county should have learned that "people would like to have a little more straight talk," he said.

But Dwyer said if the tax wasn't dedicated, "people would have hollered, 'Well, you said it's all about public safety.'"

Sorenson also said the dedicated funds will further "shackle" county spending, potentially allowing waste in one area while needed services are cut.

Progressive critics of the many failed county public safety measures in the past have said that they devote money to law enforcement and jails while underfunding crime prevention and treatment programs that are cheaper, more humane and effective at reducing crime.

Despite a decade of county complaints that law enforcement is underfunded, the county violent crime rate fell 11 percent from 1996 while the property crime rate fell 15 percent, according to FBI data.

## DIRE?

Tax supporters have issued dire threats of what will happen if the flat tax doesn't pass and the county loses about \$20 million in federal funding.

Dwyer predicts mass layoffs. "We're talking 250, maybe 300 less people." With so much threatened, any opponents of the tax "don't care about the community," he said.

Commissioner Stewart said the county may release 1,100 criminals. "We're just going to let them loose."

The cuts cited by county officials include 160 jail beds, drug, alcohol and sex offender treatment programs, violent crimes detectives, the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, elderly and disabled and mentally ill programs and a long list of other services.

But Sorenson said he doesn't think this dire scenario will happen. Based on the "very positive feedback" he's heard from local congressional representatives, Sorenson said, at least an additional year of Secure Rural Schools (SRS) funding is more likely than not. Even if SRS doesn't pass, it will be "tragic," but the county will not have to follow the drastic cuts that flat tax supporters have threatened, Sorenson said.

"It's basically the tax or a catastrophe, and I don't see it that way," Sorenson said. "You can look at all kinds of things" for alternatives, he said. For example, the county could choose to close more jail beds to fund youth drug and alcohol treatment programs and the WIC program, he said.

It's unlikely that 250 to 300 actual people will be laid off, Sorenson said. The county staff estimate is 189 positions. But many of those positions may be already vacant.

The county could also ask employees to volunteer for temporary unpaid vacations or furloughs, Sorenson said. The county has no hiring or wage freeze now but could also ask unions for that, similar to the approach other agencies have used to avoid layoffs, according to Sorenson. Another idea would be increasing permit and other fees on developers such as other jurisdictions have done, he said. Although it could eventually make borrowing more costly, the county could also spend down its reserves, Sorenson said. "Obviously, there's some flexibility."

If the county is in a budget crisis, "we



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