

Council considering new income tax

Written by George Browning
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County residents could possibly see a slight increase in their income tax if a new Local Income Option Income Tax is implemented by the Washington County Council.

The council received ordinances that have been drafted to implement the tax and the subject was discussed on an information receiving basis only at their regular meeting July 1.

"We have had discussion in the past with the jail (renovation) there will be new expenses," said council President David Hoar. "We have some figures from the engineer that has been brought forth by the engineer to show the additional costs."

Hoar said there is the possibility of housing inmates from the state and other counties to help off-set some of those new costs, but there are too many unknowns with that to factor that into whether or not that will actually happen.

"That is not in concrete," Hoar said. "It's a possibility, but it's not something we can bank on as we go into this budget and future years. That is up to the state and other counties as to what they do with prisoners. We have heard that there are counties around us that have vacancies."

That's where the new tax comes in.

"One of the ways to deal with it is by establishing a tax for public safety," he said. "With that, we have to establish a property tax relief. If we enact the public safety tax, we also have to implement a property tax relief of .25."

The council will decide how the property tax relief will be distributed as for whether it's given to all real estate owners or certain groups of property owners.

If implemented the tax could generate an estimated \$900,000 to spend on public safety. Of that amount, \$650,000 can be used in the county general and \$250,000 will be distributed to other public safety entities in the county, such as volunteer fire departments, the city of Salem, Pekin, Campbellsburg – all taxing unites for public safety.

"The money has to be used for public safety," Hoar said. "In our county general fund this tax will help eliminate some of our detention center budget pressures as far as officers. It will give a little bit of relief back to the general fund budget."

Council Attorney Mark Clark said if tax payers take their income tax they paid off their W2 from last year and increase the amount paid by .25, they can have an idea of how much they will pay.

He told the council there is no time crunch, but in order to have a full year of 2014 collection the new tax must be given to the state by Oct. 1.

The council decided to advertise a public hearing for their Aug. 5 regular meeting to discuss the ordinance.

Jon Spaulding made the motion, Ben Bowling made the second and it passed unanimously.

"I think Mark and David have done a good job of explaining the details and the need is there," Spaulding said. "If you look at the volunteer fire departments, there are several with really tight budgets. Since I've been in (office) since the first of the year and have talked to department heads, there is no more room in the budgets to cut.

"Our backs are against the wall. Now we have the jail project that is coming on and it will add that much more pressure. I just don't see any other alternatives."

In other business, the council voted to pass an inter-local agreement with the City of Salem for Animal Control for this year.

Prior to this year the council contributed \$20,000 to the city for animal control, but the city asked for an increase of \$15,000.

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The commissioner's found the money, but the county was hesitant in paying the additional amount without an agreement.

After an agreement was drawn up, other issues came up regarding animal control, such as what to do with county animal control if the county animal control officer is busy with his other duties, which include being the superintendent at the county fairgrounds.

The council agreed to go back and meet with the city to iron out a few more of those details to make the inter-local agreement more up to date.

The council's next meeting will be Aug. 5 at 9 a.m., the public hearing is scheduled to take place at 11 a.m.