

New jail tax gets Boulder County commissioners' support, expanding their number doesn't

Sheriff wants to fund new alternative-sentencing facility, upgrades

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Editor's note: This article has been edited to correct the rate of the jail tax proposal. That rate is 0.185 percent.

Boulder County commissioners voiced support on Thursday for a proposal by Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle for a tax that would go toward a new facility for people serving alternative sentences and upgrades to the county jail.

However, the three commissioners balked at a request for a ballot measure that would expand the commission from three to five members and another that would have the county convert to home rule.

The commission will officially put items on the ballot later in August for November's election.

Pelle is asking for a new tax that would provide for the construction of a new facility that would house alternative sentencing programs for people who are, for example, serving work release sentences where they work during the day and are housed in the jail at night.

"All of our alternative sentencing programs, like work release, are over capacity," Pelle said. "We have a waiting list ... Waiting lists for alternative sentencing programs reduces their effectiveness."

Pelle said that the jail is also in need of remodeling and upgrades, particularly as deputies deal with chronic overcrowding and a larger number of mentally ill inmates.

He added that the 0.185 percent tax would last five years and raise about \$50 million in revenue and could replace the emergency flood recovery tax that expires next year.

"This is a problem that has been looking for a solution for a long time," he said. "It's a growing problem that is not going away. It's a way for us to fund this without taxes going up."

The commissioners expressed support for the measure and directed county staff to write up language for a ballot proposal.

"We can't keep moving along the same path we have been," Commissioner Cindy Domenico said. "For me this is a great solution. We don't have the cash flow. This is something we will have to ask the voters."

Although commission support for a new alternative sentencing facility and jail upgrades were unanimous, commissioners weren't as enamored with a call by one resident for the county to adopt a home rule charter as well as a petition calling for the commission to expand from three to five members.

Currently Weld and Pitkin Counties are home rule, which means those counties can do things like change certain elected positions to appointments, create nonpartisan elections, set the salary for elected officials and offer more control over various departments. It would also allow the county to expand from three to five commissioners without voter approval.

Denver and Broomfield Counties are also home rule but have unique dual city/county status, according to the Colorado Local Government Handbook. About 100 towns and cities have adopted a home rule form of government.

About 12 people spoke in favor of the county expanding the commission from three to five districts. Among them was Gary Cooper, who is running for county commissioner as a Republican and helped circulate a petition on the matter.

"The citizens have indicated a high level of approval to increase their input on the make up of the commission," Cooper said. "The most common answer we received was 'that makes sense.'"

The proposed change to commissioner numbers would either make five geographical districts or keep three in geographical districts and add two at-large commissioners. A representative from the League of Women voters said that her organization was supporting placing the proposal on the ballot.

Peg Cage, chairwoman of Boulder County Republicans, said she was strongly in favor of upping the number of commissioners to five. She added that should the commissioners turn their backs on the citizenry, she would turn her back on the commissioners and showed off her t-shirt that read "Freedom is the only tent big enough for everyone."

"The thing I've heard the most while we were trying to get this on the ballot was 'Oh, we already tried that. I hope you will prove the naysayers wrong.'"

For their part, the commissioners approved of a having a "conversation" on the matter, but they seemed to be wary of placing the item on the ballot before such a conversation takes place.

Commissioner Elise Jones said that voters shot down a similar proposal in the 1980s.

She added that she is concerned that should the county break down into five districts, that might lead to a lack of motivation for crafting county-wide solutions, as representatives might only be concerned with their own districts.

"I appreciate that there is concern in the community," Jones said. "We should have a discussion. I don't feel we are at the point in the discussion where we need to put this on the ballot."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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