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August 29, 2007

Fall ballot options: taxes, taxes and debt

By [Carolyn Sackariason](#)

[Aspen, CO Colorado](#)

August 28, 2007

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ASPEN — Citizens this fall will have an option to tax themselves in an effort to clean up the Roaring Fork River and ride free buses throughout town, as well as allow City Hall to borrow money to build a hydroelectric plant to generate renewable energy.

Voters also will be asked to approve changing the way they elect City Council and the mayor into office, essentially doing away with run-off elections.

The City Council on Monday approved four ballot questions that will be put to voters on Nov. 5. A fifth proposed ballot measure — changing the mayor's term from two to four years — was voted down because of lingering political issues that council members couldn't hash out.

But voters will be asked to institute Instant Runoff Voting at the polls. It would eliminate holding another election a month later if candidates don't receive the majority in the May election.

Citizens will be asked to approve the concept of ranked-choice voting and then let the government form a citizen task force to determine exactly what method would be used in elections.

A favorable option appears to be changing the current law so that City Council candidates and the mayor must win 50 percent of the majority, plus one. Voters would select their first choice and once that candidate has been established as the winner, a second ballot count would ensue without the first winner to establish the second highest vote-getter.

Tax for transportation

Voters will be asked to create a new 2.1 percent use tax on construction and building materials that would go into effect Jan. 1 2008. The ballot measure also includes a new 0.15 percent sales tax that would be effective Sept. 2, 2009 — a day after the current .25 percent tax for parking expires.

The tax revenue will pay for the operation, maintenance, capital replacement and improvements to the city's transit service and pedestrian amenities, according to city officials.

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City Hall contracts with the Roaring Fork Transit Authority to operate eight free shuttles in Aspen, which carry about 1 million people a year. The contract will cost City Hall \$4.1 million this year, according to a memo to City Council from transportation staff.

But there's an annual shortfall in the transportation fund between \$1.6 million and \$2.2 million through 2014 because the primary tax sources can't keep pace with increasing costs. As costs continue to increase by at least 6 percent a year, revenue sources are expected to increase by only 3.5 percent per year, according to city staff.

Paying for a dirty river

A property tax of .87 mills is being proposed to pay for a citywide stormwater management plan.

The Roaring Fork River is dirtier than it should be, thanks to increasing levels of sediment and pollutants that are carried by stormwater runoff that originate from streets and sidewalks, according Trish Aragon, the city's engineer.

Rio Grande Park is slated to be overhauled to accommodate the city's plan for stormwater runoff. The program includes more systems similar to the Jenny Adair Stormwater Facility to reduce the amount of pollutants that hit the Roaring Fork.

The dedicated property tax would be used to fund the annual costs of the program, plus all of the capital investments. City officials estimate that the property tax would generate about \$12 million over the next 15 years. The tax would be equal to a single-family homeowner paying an estimated \$13.24 a month; an owner of affordable housing paying \$0.62 a month and a large commercial property owner paying \$606.70 a month, according to a memo written by Aragon.

A development fee also is proposed, which would be assessed against all properties at the time of building the system. The fee would be \$2.88 per square foot of the proposed impervious area. Proceeds from that fee would be used to pay for improvements to the storm sewer collection system.

Renewable energy costly

A proposed \$5.5 million hydroelectric plant would increase the city's electric utility's renewable energy supplies by 8 percent.

Voters are asked to issue debt bonds worth \$5.5 million with a repayment cost of \$10.7 million for a new hydropower facility, which would capture the waters from Castle Creek. The facility also would be funded by a \$400,000 grant from the Community Office for Resource Efficiency. The city will pay \$780,000 toward the project.

The plant would produce 5.5 million kWh a year, which equates to electricity consumed by 655 typical homes in Aspen. It also would eliminate 5,167 tons of CO2 emissions — a .6 percent reduction in community-wide carbon emissions.

Voters also would have to approve using open space for a facility designed to house the turbines and generators for the hydropower. It would be built on an empty lot near the city shops underneath the Castle Creek Bridge on Power Plant Road.

The project would utilize existing water rights, headgates and water storage components of the original Castle Creek hydroelectric plant that met all of Aspen's electric power needs from 1892 through 1958.

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