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Polk raises tax to expand jail

The increase, opposed by some, will raise \$49 million in 10 years

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BARTOW -- Less than one month after raising impact fees, the Polk County Commission has increased the public-service tax to help fund an expansion to the County Jail.

The county estimates that by increasing the public-service tax from 8 percent to 10 percent, \$49 million will be raised in 10 years.

Commissioner Randy Wilkinson voted against the increase, which passed 4-1.

"It's discouraging when taxes seem to keep skyrocketing," Wilkinson said.

The public-service tax is tacked onto electricity, natural gas, liquefied petroleum gas, water service and manufactured gas in the unincorporated areas. The increase begins Oct. 1.

Wilkinson is against expanding the South County Jail, located in Frostproof, which has been operating with several hundred inmates over capacity for more than a year.

Sheriff Grady Judd, who estimates the jail addition will cost about \$42 million, said the expansion is necessary to meet today's needs as well as keep up with growth.

Wilkinson argues that too many people go to jail who shouldn't and that the expansion isn't necessary.

"They'll say crime is down because we arrest more people," he said. " I believe that we're stuck in this cycle . . . of this pro-arrest policy."

Wilkinson's critics argue he holds a grudge against the Sheriff's Office because he was once an inmate himself.

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He was arrested by Bartow police in 2002 on a domestic-violence battery charge after an argument with his ex-wife.

But Wilkinson said he is just as critical with other county department budgets, such as transportation.

"Three years before I was arrested for domestic violence," he said, "I was saying all these things when we were buying the jail. I was bringing all these same things up before it ever happened."

Wilkinson said he does support a work-release program that the Sheriff's Office proposes but will not vote to raise taxes to fund it.

A handful of tax opponents spoke at Wednesday's public hearing, including Beverly Kruger of Lakeland.

"You are piling tax after tax upon us, so each little tax really mounts up," she said.

"We don't need all this. We don't need any more taxes."

Others were critical that the public-service tax increase does not affect municipalities, which also contribute to putting inmates in jail.

The public-service tax increase approved Wednesday comes in the wake of the commission's decision to implement a parks and recreation impact fee of \$444, and raise the existing emergency-services impact fee to \$97.

Taxes and impact fees have been hot topics in Polk County government as officials try to find money to cover a \$581 million shortfall.

Polk officials say the county needs \$581 million for big-ticket projects such as road construction, parks, new libraries and jail expansion.

The gap has grown for years because there were no designated funding sources for parks and recreation, facilities, drainage, libraries, law enforcement and information technology.

Impact fees cannot be used toward the \$581 million shortfall -- only for growth.

But the public-service-tax revenue can pay for operating or capital projects.

One more tax will be up for debate next month, when the commission will decide if it will pass a municipal service tax unit in unincorporated Polk County.

Commissioner Bob English says that by implementing an MSTU of \$2.50 per \$1,000 of taxable property value, \$473 million would be generated over 10 years.

The plan calls for offsetting the impact on taxpayers by reducing the property tax by 12.5 cents per \$1,000 of taxable property value.

Each year thereafter, the tax rate would drop another 12.5 cents for 10 years, if certain conditions are met.

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