



Property tax votes in the works for recreation, hospital

By J.R. Logan and Andrew Oxford

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The Taos Youth and Family Center as well as Holy Cross Hospital require millions of dollars worth of repairs but will local voters agree to pay higher property taxes to cover the cost?

Two groups are independently working on tax proposals. One would create a stand-alone parks and recreation district. The other would generate money to help pay for facilities at Holy Cross Hospital.

The two efforts are still in their early stages. Formal proposals have not been presented to the Taos County Board of Commissioners, which would ultimately decide whether to schedule a special election for new mill levies.

But talk among local leaders, hospital officials and sports boosters suggest commissioners will be asked to make such a decision soon. For local voters, that means weighing the merits of each proposal, and deciding if they are willing to accept one or both of these increases.

Rec Tax

The Taos Sports Alliance, a local group of recreation proponents, is preparing a proposal for a new property tax to fund recreation of every kind countywide.

For its members, the opportunities and quality of life provided by well-maintained parks, modern softball fields and functioning sports leagues are priceless.

The tax — one mill levied to every property in the county — would cost the owner of a \$200,000 home about \$67 a year.

In return, the new tax would bring in an estimated \$1.4 million a year.

For supporters of local recreation, that reliable source of revenue could not only take care of years worth of maintenance problems on existing facilities like the Taos Youth and Family Center, but it could bring modern courts, fields, and trails across the county.

According to the Sports Alliance, a rec district would be a way to get around the turmoil of local politics and tight government budgets.

“It’s a way to execute the plans that we’ve been frustrated with,” said Mark Yaravitz, secretary of the Taos Sports Alliance.

The Sports Alliance knows a lot about frustration. Years back, the group successfully lobbied the then-Taos Town Council to build a state-of-the-art soccer facility meant to attract premier teams looking for high-altitude training. But only one of the three planned fields at the Eco Park was built, and the center still lacks basic amenities like locker rooms.

According to the Alliance, finicky politics are to blame for leaving the facility half-baked.

The town might also get behind a dedicated rec tax to take some weight off its budget.

At the moment, the town bears the full brunt of operating and maintaining the Taos Youth and Family Center. While the government was able to come up with the money to build the center, it puts one-tenth of its annual budget toward running the facility.

Now, after years of deferred maintenance, the town is now looking at millions in repairs just to keep the building livable.

While the needs in the center of town are obvious, the Sports Alliance is currently asking outlying communities for their wish lists to come up with projects that benefit people across the county.

When and if the issue goes to a referendum, the group says it would like to have specific projects identified so voters know what they’re going to get for their money.

Depending on how the ballot question is worded, money from the levy could be used for capital improvements like new softball fields and basketball courts, to projects aimed at preserving open space.

The group is also proposing a portion of the tax be dedicated to hiring staff to handle basic sports administration like youth baseball leagues — time-consuming jobs that are now left up to volunteer parents.

Peter French, vice-president of the Sports Alliance, said he doesn’t expect the issue to go to a vote for at least six months, and perhaps not until next year.

Holy Cross Hospital

At Holy Cross Hospital, lean financial times have prompted administrators to put off the upkeep and replacement of vital if not exactly sexy pieces of equipment.

But as boilers break down, hospital officials are taking an increasingly urgent tone when discussing the need to invest in the building, which is owned by Taos County and was constructed with financing from local taxpayers.

Capital needs are expected to total \$7.3 million over the next three years.

Administrators have undertaken an engineering analysis of infrastructure such as plumbing and electrical systems during the last several months. A comprehensive internal analysis of other equipment needs has also been completed. Among the most urgent needs are a boiler and

similar big-ticket items such as refrigeration units. But at the end of the last financial quarter, the hospital had less than one month worth of cash on hand.

It's a precarious financial situation Taos Health Systems board chair Ron Burnham recently likened to living paycheck- to-paycheck.

The hospital expects to curb its losses, which have totaled in the millions of dollars in recent years.

But administrators expect cuts in payments from Medicare — a major source of revenue — to continue, keeping up the financial pressure.

So hospital officials and some local leaders are hoping taxpayers will approve a tax to chip in, as they have in the past.

A formal proposal has not yet been put forward but at a recent meeting of an intergovernmental committee tasked with studying the hospital, town and county officials suggested a levy dedicated solely to building maintenance and equipment rather than salaries or general operations could be politically palatable.

Unlike the rough drafts for a recreation tax district, a mill levy would for the hospital would likely expire after four or five years.

Fifteen counties across New Mexico have created property tax districts to support hospitals or other health-care facilities.

And while the county has reached the ceiling with its gross receipts tax rate, property taxes remain relatively low compared to the rest of New Mexico, perhaps making a temporary hike an easier sell with voters.

But hospital leaders appear to be treading carefully.

A mill levy to support Holy Cross Hospital was last proposed in 2012 but was rejected by the Taos County Board of Commissioners and never presented to voters.

That defeat was largely attributed to a rushed campaign and reluctance among commissioners to add to the tax burden on residents in a sluggish economy. That tax was also pitched as a means of shoring up the hospital's general operating budget rather than tending to specific brick-and-mortar needs, which taxpayers have proven inclined to support.

This time around, there has been talk of a tax on and off for more than a year and hospital leaders are pouring financial data on county leaders to ease what last time proved a difficult sales job.

And it is still likely to be a tough sell, especially if two separate tax proposals go before voters at once.