

Local officials mull tax to fund 911

By Cody Hooks

The Taos News, 10/29/2015

Paying for 911 service is no laughing matter. And as town and county officials sat down Thursday (Oct. 22) for their first face-to-face meeting since 2014, the subject quieted what had been an otherwise jovial gathering.

After years of wrangling between the county and the town about operating and financing the emergency call center, the two governments seemed poised to tackle the issue Taos Mayor Dan Barrone called “the elephant in the room.”

The governments have a two-year deal to finance the E911 department, with each contributing \$340,000 year, according to Taos County Manager Leandro Cordova. But that deal will sunset at the end of the fiscal year. A new funding mechanism must be in place by then or else the governments will share costs based on the number of calls coming from their respective areas.

Thursday’s conversation looked toward providing longterm funding to the department. They discussed the possibility of a new gross receipts tax (GRT) to finance the E911 department, make sure it is fully staffed and eliminate expensive overtime pay. The tax would add an extra 1.25 pennies to a \$10 purchase for consumers, but would also bring in around \$850,000 a year. The new tax would be added to all purchases in the county.

But the conversation comes at a time when both the town and county have considered passing taxes of their own to shore up their respective general funds, finance capital improvements at Holy Cross Hospital, and potentially fund recreation, as well. The hospital tax floundered. A county-imposed 1/12 GRT, which would mean an extra \$540,000 a year, didn’t move forward when it came before the commission either. As Barrone said Thursday, “My concern is that if we’re going to [impose a tax], we do it together.” If both the town and county passed new taxes without cooperating, he said, that would push Taos County into one of the highest tax rates in the state.

An E911 tax would have to be approved by voters during an election.

Cordova told *The Taos News* that while the town and county would have to share revenue from the E911 tax, it would mean the \$340,000 they currently use to pay annually for the E911 department could be allocated for other projects such as roads or the seniors program. Of course, he said, any money generated from a county 1/12 tax would go straight to the county for its designated priorities.

But Cordova said an E911 tax would “cut into the county’s capacity” to impose any other taxes should the need arise. Getting an E911 tax “will take the 1/12 off the table.”

Dominic Martinez, director of E911, said that while the department is “fully staffed” with 11 people, “that’s not enough for Taos County.”

Only two operators are in the call center at any given time. Currently, those operators work 12-hour shifts. “I still get on the radio quite a bit,” he said, adding that employees are very flexible to ensure the center has enough folks to answer phones.

Taos Town Councilor Fritz Hahn said he’d like to see a joint task force to assess needs and priorities within the town and county before either government moves forward with a new tax.

But Taos County Commissioner Candyce O’Donnell, District 5, told *The Taos News* Monday (Oct. 26), “I don’t think we need a task force. I think county staff knows what our needs are.” She requested county staff get an analysis of what each possible tax would generate for a future commission meeting.

Taos County Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn, District 4, told *The Taos News* the E911 tax “makes a lot more sense.”

He said that while the E911 department is stable financially, “we could use another operator and we could certainly use all the gadgets in the cars.” The E911 call center uses a computer program called Spillman to take calls and dispatch officers, but the police cars don’t yet have the computers and software necessary to interface with the Spillman system at the call center, meaning much of the capacity of that system is going unused. Getting police cars equipped with those computers and software would count as capital improvements and could likely be purchased in the first or second year of the tax, Blankenhorn said.

He noted that a joint town-county tax would change the governance of the E911 department. “We basically run the joint,” he said. But that’s a discussion for down the road, he said.

According to Cordova, the county has the power to get an E911 tax on the ballot without the town, but said that will be part of ongoing conversations between the governments. Even if everything to get a new tax was set in motion last week, it would still likely be January 2017 before either government would see any revenue from the tax.

After years of wrangling between the county and the town about operating and financing the emergency call center, the two governments seemed poised to tackle the issue Taos Mayor Dan Barrone called “the elephant in the room.”