



## County Commission Communications

*A Periodic Column Written by Ed Douglas, Presiding Commissioner*

### ADDRESSING CONSTITUENT QUESTIONS

July 2016

Our County Commission would like to address questions raised in a recent letter to the editor about our [preliminary plans to propose a sales tax increase](#). It is important to point out that we actually are very appreciative of input and questions from constituents because it gives us an opportunity to answer those questions. Citizens who take time to express concerns should be applauded for their interest and involvement. Following are point-by-point answers to questions raised. Questions and/or statements put forth are in bold.

**Why would a Republican consider raising taxes?** The first item I would like to address is how a Republican (me) can consider a tax increase as a solution. Generally, my philosophy is conservative in nature in that I do believe it is important to make wise use of taxpayer money and be as efficient as possible. It is a preferable strategy to cut expenses first if they can be cut without a drop in necessary services. However, after studying this for the past 18 months as well as getting input and perspective from the 28 years experience of my other two commissioners, we have concluded that we are inadequately funded and have been for a number of years. The easiest thing for me to do would be to do nothing and gradually let services be reduced. But, in my opinion, the easiest solution wouldn't be the right solution.

**Our county serves 5600 people outside the city.** Our county government does not just serve only the rural population of the county (5600 people). We serve the entire county for a number of services (over 15,000 people). There are many offices in county government that do not exist in city government. As an example, there is no city collector, assessor, recorder, public administrator or election authority. Additionally, there are very limited costs to the city for the court system which includes a juvenile office, associate and circuit judge and circuit clerk. We provide those services for the entire county. Those services are provided only by the county and funded only by the county.

**Combine the County Recorder of Deeds with the County Treasurer as was done previously.** The county recorder of deeds was never part of the County Treasurer's office. It was at one time part of the Circuit Clerk's office. A number of years ago, when it was evident that the recording of deeds was not getting the attention it should due to the increasing needs of the judicial system, the decision was made to separate the office from the Circuit Clerk's office. It should also be noted that the Recorder of Deeds office substantially pays for itself from fees; a large portion of which is only received by the county when the offices are separate. Based on this reimbursement, the county actually expends less county funds as a separate office than a combined office. Of the 114 Missouri counties, only 18 are still combined within the Circuit Clerk's office.

**Cut County Commission Salaries in half.** It is not legally possible for commissioners to cut their salary or any other elected officials salary in half. A minimum salary of \$27,060 for Commissioners and \$2000 more for Presiding Commissioner is set for counties with similar assessed valuations by state statute. Our salaries are currently higher than the minimum set by state statute, \$32,765 and \$34,765 respectively. These salaries are set by a Salary Commission that includes all the elected officials of the county. Salaries are set (increased or not) by this Salary Commission every two years uniformly for all elected officials. It would not be legal to cut Commissioners salaries without cutting all elected officials salaries uniformly which would have to be done by the Salary Commission.

**Doing Away with Township Form of Government.** Our county has a township form of government that only 21 counties in the state currently have. We have studied this issue and have found that the cost to consolidate into a county form of government would actually cost more, not less. It is true that there are some service benefits from a county form of government that can make sense for some counties. We have a plan whereby with some modest additional revenue, we can assist the townships in improving their roads at a much lower cost to the county than switching to a county form of government. Therefore, we believe our plan is the appropriate solution for our county at this time.

**Combining Sheriff and Police offices.** It was also mentioned that city and county law enforcement could be combined. It should be noted that state statutes require that a county have a sheriff, so the city would have to want to

combine with us, and the city has not proposed this to us. Conceptually, consolidation makes some sense; but in actual practice, this is very difficult to put together, and we (as of yet) have not found counties and cities our size in our state that have done this. But we are open to continuing to study this. Under the right circumstances, it may be a viable approach for some cost savings.

**Summary of our Position**

In summary, what I have found over the last 18 months is that our county has a 3/4 cent sales tax, which compares very unfavorably to the five contiguous counties which have tax rates ranging from 1.25% to 2.50% (a range of 67% to 333% higher than our county). Additionally, the other counties have a much higher property tax ranging from 4 to 18 times as much (our county property tax is virtually zero and it should be noted we are not planning on raising it). Finally, some of these same counties have significant reserves for contingencies which we don't have. In fact, we have to budget most all of our small operating reserves each year to make our budget balance which is not a good way to run a county. As a result of being a retail hub, we have a larger jail population than surrounding counties, and these costs continue to increase (city and county law enforcement arrests become county expense because they are primarily prosecuted under state law causing this expense to be funded by the county). Emergency service costs continue to increase; and as mentioned, we believe we have a plan to make our county roads better. Furthermore, we have ongoing courthouse and facilities maintenance needs and the need to build a real reserve. Our choices, as we see it, are cuts in needed county services over time or a plan to bring us up to the lowest sales tax rate of the counties surrounding us (1.25% a .5% increase). At that rate, we can maintain and improve service and meet long term county needs while continuing to be efficient as possible.

Again, we appreciate the questions and welcome additional input as we continue to plan for the future. Feel free to come up to the courthouse or call as you have questions.

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