

Poll: Boulder County voters support open-space tax, but not countywide bus pass

County tests residents' reactions to possible tax proposals

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Boulder County public opinion survey results

In a Dec. 3-14 telephone poll conducted for the county commissioners, Talmey-Drake Research and Strategy Inc. asked samples of registered Boulder voters whether they'd favor several tax proposals.

• Open Space; sustainability

programs: Seventy-seven percent said they'd favor a 15-year extension of an existing 0.25 percent sales and use tax, now due to expire in 2019, and continue spending its revenues on purchasing, managing and maintaining open space. Seventy-four percent said they'd favor extending that tax but having the county spend a portion on open space and part on county "sustainability programs."

• **Free transit passes:** Forty-five percent said they'd vote in favor of increasing county property taxes by an amount that would equate to \$50 a year on a \$400,000 home, in order to help pay for providing free transit passes for everyone living in Boulder County. Thirty-eight percent said they'd support raising property taxes by up to \$150 a year on a \$400,000 home to subsidize such countywide community transit passes.

• Residential subdivision road

reconstruction: Fifty-two percent said they'd vote in favor of increasing property taxes by 1 percent to raise \$5 million a year — about \$25 a year on a \$400,000 home — and spend it on reconstructing subdivision roads in unincorporated Boulder County. Forty-six percent said they'd support a new 0.1 percent sales and use tax, to raise that \$5 million a year for subdivision roads.

Further information : Talmey-Drake's report about the survey's

A 15-year extension of an existing 0.25 percent Boulder County sales tax that helps pay for open space would likely pass if county commissioners put such a question on November's ballot, a recent poll indicates.

However, Boulder County voters would probably reject a proposal to raise county property taxes to help pay for free mass transit passes for everyone living in the county.

Those were among the conclusions reported by Bob Drake of Talmey-Drake Research and Strategy Inc. after his firm interviewed 605 registered Boulder County voters.

That December 2015 survey, the latest in a series of annual polls commissioned by the Board of County Commissioners, tested voters' possible support of, or opposition to, a set of possible ballot questions the commissioners asked Drake's firm to include.

Commissioners emphasized, however, that they're still months away from having to make up their minds about advancing any tax proposals to next fall's Boulder County ballots.

"Really, where we are right now, is considering possibilities," said Commissioner Cindy Domenico.

Commissioner Elise Jones said the poll serves as a point-in-time barometer that helps gauge voters' opinions about extending or raising taxes for specific purposes, but "no decisions have been made — yes or no — on anything."

Support for extending tax is 'high'

A 0.25 percent sales and use tax that now generates about \$13 million a year — a major source of Boulder County funding for acquiring, maintaining and managing open space — doesn't expire until 2019, but support for extending that tax before then "is high," Drake said in his written report.

When 306 of the people interviewed in the December survey's overall sample were asked whether they'd vote to continue that sales tax for at least another 15 years beyond 2019 — and to continue earmarking all of that tax's collections exclusively for open-space spending — 77 percent said they'd vote in favor of such a ballot question, 19 percent said they'd vote against it, and the rest either said they were undecided or not sure.

Another 299 people in the overall sample were asked if they'd support a 15-year extension of the 0.25 percent tax, with part of the money to be spent on open space and part to fund "sustainability programs and infrastructure."

Sustainability programs, the pollsters told voters, could include water conservation programs, expanded recycling and composting services, energy-efficiency and renewable-energy services, and assisting local farmers to grow more local and organic foods for Boulder County residents.

Seventy-four percent of the voters asked about that option said they'd support a sales-tax extension to fund both open space and sustainability. Twenty-one percent said they'd vote against it, and 4 percent were undecided or not sure. Support for ballot questions that would raise property taxes to fund free transit passes for everyone living in Boulder County fell "well short of a majority," Drake reported.

When 306 of the people polled were asked about a possible new transit-pass property-tax increase — one that would amount to \$150 a year on a \$400,000 home — 38 percent said they'd vote in favor, 50 percent said they'd vote against it, and 11 percent said they were undecided or unsure.

findings, as well as prior years' county-commissioned polls, are available at bit.ly/1OgbEMC

Survey cost the county \$22,000

Even a possible lower-level property-tax hike to pay for transit passes — one that would amount to \$50 a year on a \$400,000 home — was only supported by 45 percent of a separate group of 299 people asked about it during the survey. Forty-four percent said they'd vote against that level of a tax increase, and 10 percent

said they were undecided or not sure.

Drake's report said that without "additional public education" about the benefits of tax-supported transit passes, it wouldn't have sufficient support "to pass at this time."

The December survey also quizzed people about a pair of ideas for increasing county taxes to generate about \$5 million a year to help fund the reconstruction of county roads in unincorporated residential subdivisions — proposals that failed "to garner great support from county voters," Drake said.

One road-rehabilitation option would impose a 0.1 percent sales tax for 15 years. Of the 301 people asked about that idea, 46 percent said they'd vote in favor of such a tax, 41 percent said they'd vote against it, and 12 percent were undecided or unsure.

A second subdivision road funding option would raise the property taxes paid by both rural and urban property owners by 1 percent a year, amounting to about \$25 in higher taxes on a \$400,000 home. Fifty-two percent of the 304 people surveyed about that idea said they'd vote in favor of it, 35 percent said they'd vote against it, and 12 percent were undecided or not sure.

"If put to a county-wide vote, passage of either version is unlikely," Drake said in his firm's written review of the poll results.

"However, a strong campaign mounted by those in favor of the property tax for subdivision roads, with no organized opposition, may succeed, depending on what other tax initiatives are on the ballot along with it," the report added.

Boulder County paid \$22,000 for Talmey-Drake's December survey, according to county spokeswoman Barb Halpin.

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