Longmont council has mixed reactions to proposed Boulder County sustainability tax

By John Fryar Times-Call staff writer Longmont Times-Call
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Boulder County commissioners' proposal to ask voters to authorize countywide collections of a new "sustainability tax" in November drew mixed reactions from Longmont City Council members Thursday night.

Those reactions ranged from Mayor Dennis Coombs' statement — after a joint City Council dinner meeting with the commissioners — that "I think I'm kind of neutral on it," to Councilman Jeff Moore flatly telling the commissioners "I'm going to have a hard time supporting it."

Last month, Commissioners Cindy Domenico, Deb Gardner and Elise Jones directed the county staff to proceed with work toward preparing a sustainability tax ballot question, which could either take the form of a new county sales tax or a property tax.

County officials and supporters of the idea have suggested a variety of ways to spend the $4-5 million such a tax would generate annually, including continuing and expanding programs targeting energy conservation and energy-use reduction, home weatherization, recycling, composting, alternative forms of transportation, water conservation and the promotion of locally produced agricultural production.

Jones said the county staff is studying about the options for the kind and size of tax that might be sought, and the programs, services and projects its collections could fund.

Commissioners reviewed some of those options during Thursday's joint meeting with the Longmont council but were met with skepticism and advice that Boulder County needs to be more specific about exactly what the tax would pay for.

"I really don't know enough about it," Councilwoman Sara Levison said after the meeting.

The county thus far has been talking about "such a broad scope of stuff" that a sustainability tax might help fund, Levison said, that "it's a little fuzzy right now."

Councilwoman Polly Christensen said after the meeting that she thought a sustainability tax "is a very, very good idea" in concept, but its success or failure at the ballot box "depends on how they cast it" to voters.

Boulder County is "going to have to say how it would be used for the next five years," Christensen said.

Moore said he's concerned that the Longmont community has more pressing needs, including services and programs for children, the elderly and needy families. He cited a high percentage of St. Vrain Valley School District children whose low family incomes make them eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches and "a very large shortage of affordable housing."

Said Moore: "Taking care of the human needs is more important than all this other stuff combined."

Councilwoman Bonnie Finley said after the meeting that she wouldn't favor a sustainability tax.

"We have way too many more issues" than those that the tax's supporters have used to argue for it, said Finley, who added that she's also heard constituents question Boulder County's spending on such items as $1.5 million share of the $7.1 million purchase price for a conservation easement over a ranch that largely lies in Gilpin County.

Coombs said after the meeting that "I personally would probably vote for it," but he predicted that the Longmont council vote would be divided if it's formally asked to endorse the tax once the final ballot language has been drafted.

Councilmen Gabe Santos and Brian Bagley did not attend Thursday's meeting.

Several of the council members who did attend noted that Longmont would be asking its own voters next month for approval of a $48 million bond issue to finance storm drainage improvements that city officials say are needed for future flood mitigation — and that the council also plans to ask voters in November for a 10-year extension of the city's 0.75 percent transportation sales tax.

"The timing is not real good" for the county's sustainability tax proposal, Moore said.

Contact Times-Call staff writer John Fryar at 303-684-5211 or jfryar@times-call.com