

Boulder DA: County should address 'real world' issues before pushing sustainability tax

By Alex Burness , Camera Staff Writer
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Boulder County District Attorney
Stan Garnett

As the Boulder County commissioners test the community's temperature toward a new tax to pay for sustainability programs, District Attorney Stan Garnett says he'll encourage them to scrap that conversation and focus on "real world" issues he feels threaten the basic functionality of several county offices.

"In good budget times, I think (a sustainability tax) would be fine. I'd probably even vote for it," Garnett said. "But we should be going on essential core service issues. Sustainability is an issue that's kind of fluffy, kind of a luxury.

"It's important, but it's not a core issue of the county."

High on Garnett's wish list are a new facility to house low-level criminals, higher salaries for his staff and a remodel of the district attorney's outdated quarters.

And while other elected county officials may not have the exact same priorities, Garnett is confident they could agree that putting a sustainability tax on November's ballot would be ill-timed.

"I would be surprised," he said, "if every elected official didn't agree with me, and if they weren't somewhat concerned by the possibility the sustainability tax."

The potential tax is still in its infancy, and is far from a sure thing. But previous discussions have yielded a slew of areas it might address, including water conservation programs, recycling and composting facilities, improvements to the local organic food system, and renewable, efficient energy services such as EnergySmart, among others.

The county commissioners must decide by Aug. 12 whether to place any measures on the November ballot

"We listen to the community, and our community asks us to act on its values," Commissioner Cindy Domenico said. "There are things that matter to people here around energy efficiency and climate change. Those are on people's minds."

Polling supports new tax

Early polling suggests the majority of county residents would support the tax.

In fact. Talmey-Drake Research and Survey Inc. reported that between Feb. 28 and March 9, about 60 percent in one sample group said they'd vote for a 0.15 percent sales tax, and 53 percent in a second group said they'd vote for a 0.75-mill property tax.

Potential ballot language isn't finalized but, according to the commissioners' staff, a 0.15 percent sales tax could generate a projected \$4.5 million annually, while a 0.75-mill property tax, about \$5.5 million a year.

That's money, Garnett said, that would go a long way toward fixing the county's jail overcrowding problem, or offering better pay.

"Staff compensation continues to be a real challenge," he said. "I've had trouble keeping pace with what other district attorneys' offices are able to pay their staff, and I know other county offices have that problem as well."

Garnett said his senior staffers often make about 20 percent less than what they'd be offered in other counties.

Boulder County Coroner Emma Hall said that compensation is an issue for her staff as well. On top of that, she's trying to make do with about the same amount of funding for a caseload that's gone from 186 autopsies in 2012 to 244 in 2013.

"I think that's where there can certainly be some frustration — when there's an idea to start a sales tax for other programs, when we've already got things that we're struggling to do," Hall said.

Additionally, Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle has been vocal about the need for funding to relieve severe jail overcrowding, whether through an auxiliary facility or otherwise.

'We have made no decisions'

Domenico said she's sympathetic to the concerns of Garnett, Pelle and Hall and others, and that she and her colleagues will take their respective accounts — as well as those from the larger community — into serious consideration between now and the Aug. 12 deadline to submit ballot measures.

"I understand their perspective and appreciate the needs that we have," she said. "And truly there are other needs we're hearing from the community that are in the mix. So we have made no decisions at this point. These are all ideas that are being discussed."

Of course, this entire conversation has been changed dramatically by September's flood.

These days, recovery on roadways and open space — which are projected to cost Boulder County nearly \$200 million through 2017 — informs every budgetary decision the county makes, according to Domenico.

"We've only recently heard how bad the budget looks for the next two years," Garnett said. "And it looks really grim."

Still, he and other elected officials are hopeful some compromise can be reached between now and November.

"We think the commissioners are great folks," Garnett said. "We just want to make sure they

remember there's core services that have been short-changed for many budget cycles now, and we want to make sure those are funded before we ask for taxpayer money for non-essential services."

Contact Camera Staff Writer Alex Burness at 303-473-1389, burnessa@dailycamera.com or twitter.com/alex_burness.