

The Register-Guard

Proposed public safety tax gets chilly reception at hearing

By Christian Hill

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A proposed tax on employers and employees to pay for a sizable expansion of Eugene's public safety system received a chilly reception during a City Council public hearing Tuesday night.

Fifteen people spoke against the proposed tax, roughly double the number who spoke for it.

Critics characterized the proposed tax as unfair and unnecessary, saying city leaders should put more money toward homelessness and other social services instead of more police officers and jail beds.

"It is cruel, it's unjust, it's regressive, it's financially idiotic," Eugene resident Shaun Winter said.

Supporters countered the proposed tax will provide needed support for a public safety system under strain as residents who call police wait longer for assistance — if an officer shows up at all.

"We need do something now to improve community safety and livability in our beautiful city," Eugene resident Jason Johnson said.

The Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce voiced its support, with conditions, for the proposed tax following a discussion by its board of directors Tuesday morning.

Brittany Quick-Warner, the chamber's chief executive and president, told city councilors many in its membership are increasingly frustrated by long response times by officers and an inability to assist once they show up. The chamber represents about 1,200 businesses.

“It’s clear to us we’re on a slippery slope,” Quick-Warner said.

The chamber’s support is contingent on city councilors revising the proposed tax to better define the metrics it would be evaluated by, take more steps to ensure the money is spent as promised, and seek voter approval to authorize the tax in five to seven years, she said.

A couple of speakers who live in Springfield testified the proposed tax is taxation without representation. City leaders in neighboring Springfield oppose the proposed tax.

In a letter to Eugene city leaders, Springfield Mayor Christine Lundberg requested that Springfield residents working in Eugene be exempted from the tax. She noted Springfield voters have approved a tax levy to help pay for its municipal jail operations and police staffing.

“While the proposed tax rate is relatively inexpensive,” Lundberg wrote, “it will have a disproportionate impact on the paycheck of our community members. ... Springfield voters have already made a significant investment in our community public safety system and have maximized our resources and funding to address the challenges of modern cities.”

Employees who live within or outside of Eugene city limits but work at a business within that boundary would pay the proposed tax. Self-employed workers and public employees would pay the proposed tax, but public agencies wouldn’t as the city is prohibited from imposing a tax on other governments.

For employees who earn more than minimum wage, the proposed tax equals 0.4% of their gross annual wages, while employers and minimum-wage workers would pay 0.2%.

A worker making \$12 an hour — the minimum wage when the tax, if approved, would likely go into effect in 2020 — would pay \$4.16 a month, and an employee earning \$43,298 — the average annual pay in Eugene in 2017 — would pay \$14.43 a month. A business that has \$500,000 in gross annual payroll would pay \$83.33 a month.

The average annual payroll for the more than 6,900 private businesses in Eugene is \$450,800, according to data from the Oregon Employment Division.

The proposed tax is projected to generate \$23.6 million a year to pay for more police officers, detectives, 911 dispatchers, jail beds and services for homeless people.