

Eugene Weekly

Payrolling the Police

Residents talk payroll tax at Eugene City Council public forum

News by Henry Houston Posted on 05/30/2019

If Eugene City Council passes a payroll tax to increase funding for public safety and you make \$15 an hour, the city of Eugene will take \$10 monthly — about the cost of a Netflix membership.

That might not sound like that much at first, but the proposal brought out a crowd of more than 100 people to a public hearing May 28, with 28 people testifying about the potential payroll tax to fund more cops on the streets, among other things. Some citizens said they were concerned about the state of policing and lack of support for homeless people, while others questioned the City Council's expenditures.

The city would tax 0.4 percent of employees' annual wage. Those who earn minimum wage would pay 0.2 percent, as well as levying a tax on businesses with an annual gross payroll of \$500,000.

The tax would raise money for public safety: 65 percent for police services, 10 percent to fire and emergency medical services, 15 percent to the municipal court and 10 percent for prevention and homeless services.

The council has the power to pass the measure, but it could also be placed on a ballot by the City Council or citizen initiative. If the council passes it, citizens could have a say through a referendum petition.

Eugene Police Department (EPD) Chief Chris Skinner told *Eugene Weekly* that the mechanism to raise money for EPD — a payroll tax — is the means to an end.

"What we're trying to get to is to serve this community in the way it should be served," Skinner says. "People are tired of calling 911 and not having officers respond."

He added that victims of crimes aren't getting the service they deserve.

"If we have discretionary time, then we're able to be in neighborhoods doing problem solving policing for those neighborhoods in crisis," Skinner said. "The first order of business centers around all those calls to service we can't go to."

Brittany Quick-Warner, CEO of Eugene Chamber of Commerce, flexed the chamber's political muscle by announcing its board of directors' unanimous approval — but with some suggestions on how it's written. She said that she's heard of how some people have given up on calling 911.

"Given all this feedback and the fundamental belief that a strong public safety system is a basis for strong economy, desirable quality of life, our board of directors is willing to step up and lead on this issue," Quick-Warner said.

She says she wants clarification on measurable outcomes, stronger language about ensuring the money goes to public safety and that voters should have a say in a few years whether to continue the tax.

Michael Carrigan spoke on the behalf of Community Alliance of Lane County, which opposes the payroll tax. He said he'd support it if the money went to homelessness shelters and to make the city a place of human rights that cares for all.

"It's clear we're facing a homeless crisis and not a public safety crisis in Eugene," he said. "I live and work in Whiteaker. I see and feel this crisis everyday."

Some residents testified that the city of Eugene has a tendency to approve tax breaks for developers, hinting strongly at the tendency to give breaks to former mayor Brian Obie of the Fifth Street Public Market, which would've helped the city pay for the services it should be providing.

"The council has given in excess of \$4-million 10-year tax break to one of the richest developers in Eugene," said Zondie Zinke, one of the residents providing testimony, adding that council has given other tax breaks to other developers, too. "As they lean on us to tax us, they are letting the money go to the top, protecting the developer."

Zinke was referring to when Eugene City Council offered a tax break to Obie for constructing a market-rate apartment complex in the Fifth Street Public Market in October 2018. The tax break that Obie received will result in a loss of \$4.3 million in revenue, according to City Council documents.

Although Councilor Mike Clark said the city needs more police, he noted that in the past he's said he doesn't agree with the mechanism. Clark echoed the chamber's suggestions and wants to track, in the upcoming years, whether businesses move their headquarters out of Eugene.

Councilor Betty Taylor also spoke out against the payroll tax. She said the money is needed for the police department, but she doesn't support having low-income residents pay for it.

"If someone is making \$15 an hour, which isn't a living wage, they would be paying \$10," Taylor said, adding that it disturbs her that there's a tax on people who are already barely getting by.

“I can’t vote for this unless we raise the amount at which someone would pay. I do agree with people that we need to do something about the homeless and homeless prevention.”

No vote has been scheduled yet.