

The Register-Guard

Opinion

Our View: Pass the payroll tax for public safety

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In just the past week, five Eugene police officers have suffered injuries in two fights with suspects. Police Chief Chris Skinner called the incidents “intolerable.” We call them illustrative – illustrative of the embarrassing new normal in Eugene, illustrative of the crimes fueled by drugs, and illustrative of the need to pass a proposed payroll tax for public safety.

Last year, Eugene City Council provided \$8.6 million worth of bridge funding for public safety to buy time to develop a longer-term solution. An advisory committee studied more than two dozen funding options before settling on a payroll tax as the best way to raise \$23.6 million annually.

New taxes

During a public hearing on the proposal last week, about two dozen people testified. More than half opposed the plan.

Many of those opponents disagreed not with the merits of investing in public safety, but with the payroll tax. For example, some pointed out that residents of Springfield and unincorporated Lane County work in Eugene would have to pay it even though they don't live in the city. That's true, but hardly a convincing argument against the plan. They benefit from increased public safety while they are in the city just as much as everyone else.

Some raised a better tax argument. They pointed out that local governments haven't exactly earned a lot of confidence in their ability to manage public resources. Look no further than the city's plans for a new City Hall and Town Square project and the seemingly unending property tax asks.

Nevertheless, that skepticism doesn't justify full-throated opposition. The public must demand oversight, accountability and a potential sunset date. The proposal offers all of that. It includes annual performance reviews, outside audits, a citizen

advisory board and required reauthorization after seven years.

Dispelling myths

Other opponents raised concerns about funding police in general and homelessness in particular. Most were based on misconceptions.

The millions would not go only to downtown issues around high-visibility homelessness, as some claim. The proposal divvies up the funds among multiple needs. About two-thirds would go to police services, including 40 patrol officers, five detectives, 10 community service officers and more. The remaining third would be split between fire and emergency services, the municipal court, mental health programs, and homeless services and prevention. Those will benefit neighborhoods across Eugene, not just downtown.

This also is not about criminalizing homelessness. The proposal does not target homeless residents. Rather, new officers will address pressing public safety needs across the board such as reducing police response times.

That's not to say more homeless residents won't have run-ins with police if there are more officers. Claiming that homeless residents are largely responsible for crime in Eugene is plainly false. Criminals come from all walks of life. But it is equally false to ignore the fact that homeless residents commit many of the low-level crimes – car break-ins, petty theft and the like. It's a complicated situation. Giving law enforcement needed resources is one part of the solution. Bolstering services for homeless residents is another part.

The need is clear

A broad approach is critical. Crime rates have ticked down slightly over the past few years, but that's in no small part a reflection of a dispirited public that doesn't feel it's worth calling about a car break-in if police won't respond or investigate. Chief Skinner told The Register-Guard editorial board that about one-third of calls for service don't get a response, and even when officers can go out to lower-level crimes, it might be hours after the call.

Meanwhile, crimes related to the drug crisis have become particularly problematic. Police no longer operate a drug task force, and the community has suffered for that. Eugene can open more shelters, expand community court and

establish programs to help people in mental health crisis, but without stemming the flow of drugs, the community will not successfully help chronically homeless residents who suffer from substance use disorders.

We have heard anecdotal evidence from businesses, analysts, University of Oregon officials and community groups that the current public safety concerns are causing people who are considering moving to the city to question whether it is a safe place to live. That is hardly the image that will encourage long-term economic health.

Eugene shouldn't lose site of the support that is rallying behind this proposal. Indeed, even though the business community will feel the effects of the tax the most, Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce CEO Brittany Quick-Warner has built support at her organization. It clearly was not an easy decision for the chamber, but Quick-Warner recognized that doing nothing to change the public safety trajectory would hurt members more than taxes.

The need for additional public safety funding has been growing for years. The current proposal was thoughtfully developed over months by an advisory committee that considered more than two dozen options. It has received a full public vetting. Now it's council's job to pass it.