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Students in local schools are heading back to class. See photos from an open house and first day of school in USD 234 on page 16.

Proposals for sales tax ballot question discussed at town hall

BY JASON E. SILVERS
The Fort Scott Tribune

The Fort Scott City Commission is expected to vote Tuesday on one of several proposals for a sales tax ballot question to be presented to voters in November.

During a town hall meeting Thursday evening at the Empress Event Center, commissioners and other city officials discussed the proposals and fielded questions from residents. Present were Fort Scott City Manager Brad Matkin, Fort Scott Police Chief Jason Pickert, Fort Scott Fire Chief Dave Bruner, Fort Scott Public Works Director Tom Coffman and all five commissioners. About 10 citizens attended the forum.

“We felt it was very important to let citizens ask questions about the half-cent sales tax to be voted on in November,” Matkin said.

Matkin said the current half-cent sales tax began in 2022 and expires in 2026. He said the commission is trying to get a proposal on the ballot in November. City officials have expressed a need for the tax to fund key city projects and equipment.

“It was a great idea by former commissioner Pete Allen to give additional funds for the street program plus the parks and community buildings program. Mostly the street program,” Matkin said.

Matkin said prior to the sales tax, there were not enough funds to address roads and other projects in the street program, or hire staff.

“With the sales tax graciously voted on and given to us by the citizens, we’ve been able to do several projects in the last four years, plus in our regular budget

we’ve been able to hire several key people in the street department.”

Matkin said in the last four years, the number of staff in the street and stormwater departments increased from about five or six people to 16 employees. He said three crews have recently been “going at one time” on various city projects, including water lines, digging up streets, as well as repairing potholes and laying bricks.

“It’s impossible to do anything with five people, let alone three,” he said, adding staff can now be divided into crews working in different areas. He said a focus continues to be on growing the town and population.

“I feel we can continue to grow,” he said. “We’re working on housing and adding businesses. We’re trying to do our part to make it better for the citizens.”

Mayor Tim VanHoecke said commissioners could not vote during the forum, but wanted to hear opinions from citizens.

Commissioner Matthew Wells read the five proposed options for a ballot question. The first option would be a half-cent sales tax with 80% of proceeds for street improvements, sidewalks, bike lanes and curbs and gutters; 10% for public safety and 10% for parks and community facilities.

The second option would be a half-cent sales tax divided with .45% of proceeds for street improvements, sidewalks, bike lanes and curbs and gutters; 1% for parks and community facilities and .1% for public safety. Option three would be a half-cent sales tax with .45% of proceeds for street improvements, sidewalks, bike lanes and curbs and



Fort Scott Fire Chief Dave Bruner, second from left, talks about needs for the fire department during a town hall meeting on proposals for a city-wide sales tax Thursday evening. Also pictured are, from left, Fort Scott Police Chief Jason Pickert, Public Works Director Tom Coffman and City Manager Brad Matkin.

gutters; and .05% for public safety.

A fourth option would be a 1% sales tax with all proceeds going toward public safety, but Wells later said wording in that option would need to be modified. A fifth option would be a half-cent tax with 90% of proceeds for street improvements, sidewalks, bike lanes and curbs and gutters; and 10% for parks and community facilities.

The sales tax would be in place for 10 years. Wells said the last option would be a renewal of the “exact same sales tax already in place.”

Citizen Charles Gentry questioned some figures included in three of the options presented. Concerning options two, three and four, “I don’t think they added up to 100%. For example, .45 percent is not even 1 percent,” Gentry said.

Wells said the information read in option four is “not correct” and wording

would need to be changed.

“It should have said a .1% sales tax and .1% used for public safety. Options three and four should go together.”

“But .1% is not even 1%,” Gentry said.

Commissioner Dyllon Olson said his proposal would be to ask for a renewal of the sales tax in its original form, but separate public safety “into its own ballot question.”

“It’s one-tenth of a percent,” Olson said. “You’re starting out with one-half, your allocation is of the half cent. Right now, it’s 90% to streets, 10% to parks.”

“You’re not taking 10% of the proceeds. It’s its own tax in itself.”

“I’m not sure you can do a one-tenth of a mill sales tax,” Gentry said.

Wells said the current sales tax would go from .5 to .6 in one option, if both questions are passed by voters.

One citizen asked the reason why funding for

public safety was put into a proposal. Matkin said 10% would be taken from the street fund in the 80-10-10 proposal.

“The reason is that fund needs money for different things to be used for public safety functions, such as equipment,” he said. “We’re coming up short for what we need from the current budget.”

Wells said the current budget includes 2 mills for public safety, so funds come from property taxes.

“As opposed to raising property taxes, this is an option to put it on a sales tax where everyone who comes through town helps fund public safety,” he said.

Bruner said his department has a rescue truck to be replaced this year and a pumper truck to be replaced in 2026. He said the goal is to ensure those trucks are replaced and the department has gear that meets standards. He also said equipment and vehicles must meet requirements.

“There are numerous things to make sure our guys are safe and prepared,” he said.

Pickert said the two primary items his department needs are evidence storage and an upgrade to radio systems. He said there are currently two locations for evidence storage, but personnel must travel to store evidence.

“In the future, we’re also working with the sheriff’s office and other entities, public safety, to upgrade radio systems,” he said. “We don’t know where the money would come from if we had to buy it today.”

In response to a citizen question, Matkin said the current sales tax has generated about \$960,000 each year the last four years.

VanHoecke said city

staff and commissioners are “very committed,” which is the reason for five separate proposals. Commissioners and city officials discussed the sales tax during a work session Monday.

“We want to make sure whichever one we go with we get it right,” he said. “We didn’t just say let’s renew or change it. There’s been a lot of discussion. In front of us now is the fruits of that work session.”

City officials were also asked if the 10% in funding was not adequate to fund public safety departments. Wells said one proposal would keep a half-cent with the same 80-10-10 split. Another proposal would be .65, which would keep the same rate for funding streets as it currently stands, as well as .1% for parks and .1% for public safety. Olson’s proposal would keep the same half-cent tax and split for streets and parks, but add .1% for public safety on a separate question.

“And voters can decide if that’s what they want,” Olson said.

In response to another citizen question, Wells said commissioners do not plan on placing five options on the ballot. He said commissioners plan to vote on an option Tuesday after considering input from citizens.

There was some discussion on the population of Fort Scott and its infrastructure, which officials said is aging.

“A lot of stuff was not done for several years,” VanHoecke said, adding city staff are working to get projects done “because if we stay status quo, we fall further behind.”

More on the sales tax issue will appear in future editions.

Back to school



Fort Scott Community College students lined up Friday morning to greet Winfield Scott Elementary School students for the first day of the new school year.

WEATHER

Sunny and hot, with a high near 95. Heat index values as high as 101. South wind 6 to 9 mph.



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Fort Scott firefighters check one of the upper-level windows of the Moody Building following a gas leak inside the building Wednesday afternoon.

City officials respond to gas leak in downtown building

BY JASON E. SILVERS
The Fort Scott Tribune

City officials averted potential disaster concerning a downtown building Wednesday afternoon.

Shortly after 3 p.m. Wednesday, Fort Scott City Manager Brad Matkin issued a public notice stating a gas leak had been discovered, and Second Street between Main Street and National Avenue would be closed to traffic until the scene was cleared. The gas leak occurred inside the Moody Building, a three-story structure at the northwest corner of Main

and Second streets.

On Friday, Matkin told the Tribune two city employees who were walking down Main Street “smelled a natural gas smell” and Matkin advised them to contact the Fort Scott Fire Department.

Matkin said gas levels inside the building reached high levels, creating a potentially hazardous situation.

“Gas levels inside the building were tested and tested at a 45 which is at a very high level,” he said.

Matkin said city officials were not aware gas and electric to the building had been left on. He said officials were able to lower gas levels after shutting off

the services to the building.

“It is the building owner’s responsibility to have these types of things shut off even when the building is condemned, unless it is an emergency,” he said.

Firefighters opened the doors and some of the upper level windows, and also inserted fans inside the building. The block of Second Street was closed for about two hours as fire personnel and other city officials worked to resolve the situation.

Matkin said the building is vacant and currently condemned. He said he could not disclose the current owner of the building.