



NEWS



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Proposed Victorville sales tax hike would fund public safety

Martin Estacio, Victor Valley Daily Press

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Victorville residents could see a ballot measure this November that would raise the sales tax by 1 percentage point to help fund the more deputies and firefighters as well as other improvements to public safety.

By a vote of 3-1 last week, with one abstention, the City Council directed staff to draft a measure that would raise the city's sales tax from 7.75% to 8.75% if approved by the Council and voters.

City staff estimates about \$15.95 million could be raised in fiscal year 2021-22.

The City Council's approval came after a presentation and report from City Manager Keith Metzler that addressed the issues currently facing deputies, firefighters, code enforcement and animal control officers. It recommended adding 51 employees to the four departments.

"Private citizens everywhere feel compelled to beef up their efforts to provide not only for their own safety but also for the safety of their neighbors and their family, and this shouldn't be," said Council member Sue Jones who introduced the motion on May 19 to draft the ballot measure.

She said the city was at a "crossroad(s)" whether to continue funding public safety as it is or give the residents a chance to decide whether they want a change in the status quo.

"And for me this begins with giving our community both the means and the voice to weigh in on what they want the future of Victorville to be," she said.

According to the public safety report, while the city's population has nearly doubled in the past 20 years from around 64,000 in 2000 to over 126,000 in 2019, the number of public safety staff had increased by about one-third.

Over the same time period, data showed public safety spending had gone up by \$36.2 million — or 351% — as the number of calls that emergency personnel responded to also increased.

Victorville has the largest population and highest crime rate of any city in the Victor Valley, according to San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department data. Eleven contract sheriff's deputies are assigned per shift to cover over 73 square miles, with three assigned to traffic duties.

Since dispatched calls have increased 30% since 2008, Metzler said this has caused response times to incidents deemed non-emergencies to increase dramatically.

For example, he said the time it took just for a deputy to be dispatched to a Priority 3 call, which might be a burglary that occurred where a suspect is no longer there, went from around 20 minutes in 2008 to almost an hour and 15 minutes last year.

Deputies might take even longer to respond since they frequently get called en route to more urgent incidents. Metzler said he'd heard from residents who complained it was taking "three to four hours" for law enforcement to arrive at their homes.

“So I think the clear point here is that the cost of service is certainly and has been for a long time outpacing the actual revenue and staffing levels, which is having a negative effect on what the public is actually feeling in terms of the level of public safety that they’re seeing,” he said.

The Victorville Fire Department has dealt with its own set of challenges.

Since 2011, as the city added more than 9,300 people to its population, the number of calls firefighters responded to grew by almost 50% with the same number of stations.

Last year, when the city began running the department again after terminating its contract with the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**, VFD handled over 22,000 incidents.

Metzler said having one station closed in the southwestern part of the city has meant two other stations picking up the slack. Station 315 on Eucalyptus Street was built in 2008 and has never been fully staffed, according to a previous Daily Press report.

He proposed staffing a medic squad with overtime personnel until the station can reopen under a rosier financial outlook.

As is the case in other cities, the coronavirus outbreak has taken a toll on Victorville’s budget.

According to the report, projections before the pandemic showed the city ending the 2019-20 fiscal year with a \$1.9 million surplus. Now, the city is anticipating a deficit of more than \$800,000. In fiscal year 2020-21, the deficit is projected to jump to more than \$2.5 million.

“The COVID-related projections suggest that without an increase in revenue, a reduction in (public safety) service levels (expenditures) or a combination of both, the general fund will go negative in the 24/25 fiscal year,” the report read.

Mayor Pro Tem Rita Ramirez, who abstained from voting, questioned whether raising taxes amid COVID-19 was appropriate given that the pandemic has forced many people out of work and hurt their financial outlooks.

“Putting another burden on the backs of our residents is unacceptable to me,” she said.

In 2017, a measure that would have raised the sales tax by 50 cents to fund public safety services failed to gain the required two-thirds majority.

For the proposed 1% sales tax hike, the requirements are less stringent.

The general sales tax increase would need to be approved by a two-thirds majority of the City Council and a majority (50% plus 1) of registered voters. The Council is expected to discuss the ballot measure during a meeting on June 2.

<https://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20200529/proposed-victorville-sales-tax-hike-would-fund-public-safety>

Two hikers rescued on the 49 Palms Oasis trail

Jene Estrada, Hi-Desert Star

Posted: May 28, 2020



Hikers enjoy a respite from staying at home on the 49 Palms Oasis hiking trail Saturday morning, March 21.

Kurt Schauppner The Desert Trail

TWENTYNINE PALMS — Two hikers on the 49 Palms Oasis trail were rescued by the Morongo Basin Ambulance Association and the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department on Thursday morning after suffering from heat-related illnesses; the pair were hiking in temperatures that exceeded 100 degrees.

The Morongo Basin Ambulance Association got a call at 11:15 a.m. Thursday about a downed hiker on the trail showing signs of a heat sickness. One ambulance and one San Bernardino County fire crew from the Twentynine Palms responded to the scene. Joshua Tree Search and Rescue and the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department also responded.

The first responders hiked about a mile and a half into the trail and contacted the hiker. She was treated and escorted out of the trail but, on the way back, her hiking partner also started showing signs of heat related-illness.

The second hiker, also female, was treated and transported to the Hi-Desert Medical Center in stable condition.

MBA operations manager Matthew Welsch said that both hikers were rescued in under three hours.

He reminded everyone to stay safe during the high temperatures of desert summer.

“If you plan on outdoor activity in the Morongo Basin this weekend, be sure to bring plenty of water and be prepared for hot temperatures,” he said. “Be safe.”

http://www.hidesertstar.com/news/article_0b71d93c-a13f-11ea-b4d1-ef6c18bfe7fe.html