

Williamson County residents seek solutions to fund schools

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Steve Smith, Williamson County Budget Committee chairman, and County Mayor Rogers Anderson talk during a recent budget committee meeting at the county administrative building. (Photo: Kerri Bartlett/The Tennessean)

As the county commission gears up to convene for its last meeting of the fiscal year July 8, some residents are worried about the future funding of schools. The commission is expected to cast a vote on Williamson County Schools' \$386.2 million operational budget, which would mean an 11-cent property tax increase.

The need for additional resources to keep schools operating as the highest-achieving school district in the state has some county residents concerned about how the county will keep dollars flowing.

A few main revenue streams currently fund schools, including the most recent 0.5% sales tax increase passed by referendum in 2018 to fund school debt, the county Educational Impact Fee (currently in the court appeal process) to fund school capital and a portion of the county's property tax.

Even with these funding structures in place, some residents say more is needed — especially to fund school capital, or the construction of school buildings and renovations.

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The proposed property tax increase from a rate of \$2.15 to \$2.26 per \$100 of assessed value would fund a salary increase of \$3,000 for first-year teachers as part of the larger WCS operational budget, which comprises two-thirds of the total county budget.

The school district also has a looming five-year capital plan that calls for the construction of new schools totaling \$551 million over the next five to six years.

Residents seek solutions in adequate facilities tax

Brentwood residents Shelly Shiflett and Kim Coggin, who have children enrolled in WCS, believe the county might have an additional revenue mechanism at its disposal that could benefit schools.

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At a June 11 public hearing on the tax increase, Coggin explained that expanding the adequate facilities tax (also referred to as a privilege tax) to include new commercial businesses in cities, and charging the maximum rate of \$2, could bring in additional revenue dollars for school capital.

Currently, the adequate facilities tax is structured under the Williamson County Private Act of 1987, Chapter 118, which gives the county authority to collect the tax from new residential developments at a maximum of \$1 per square foot and a maximum of \$2 for nonresidential development in any part of the county, unincorporated or incorporated. By law, the amount collected can go toward only brick-and-mortar costs, not operational costs.

Current collections of adequate facilities tax

The county currently collects 34 cents per gross square foot from new nonresidential development in the unincorporated county, while it collects \$1 (the maximum) from new residential developments in the county and its six cities, with 70 cents of that amount dedicated to schools.

However, no adequate facilities tax is currently collected from nonresidential developments in the county's municipal areas.

And some residents believe it should be.

"We want parity in the adequate facilities tax between residents who live in Williamson County and the business developers who build in our county," Shiflett said.

"Residents pay and the developers should too, and this could go towards growth, helping to pay for growth in the form of capital needs for schools."

Shiflett and Coggin say — according to their own calculations — if the maximum adequate facilities tax were collected from nonresidential development in cities, the amount could be substantial.

As an example, Coggin collected the total number of square footage built in the city of Franklin over the last 10 years, which totals 13.75 million square feet, a figure that was verified by city administrator Eric Stuckey. If developers were required to pay the maximum adequate facilities tax of \$2 per gross square foot, the county could have collected \$27.5 million, Coggin says.

To both residents, the amount is significant enough to consider applying the adequate facilities tax to new commercial developments.

Shiflett and Coggin added they are not opposed to the property tax increase, which has gained momentum and support from many commissioners as it approaches a final vote but prefer that all options are considered.

"We don't want the county commission to not look at this because they are looking at property taxes. We need to look at all possibilities of revenue," Coggin said.

Commissioner supports a deeper look

County Commissioner Tom Tunncliffe, 7th District, said he believes it's worth a deeper look.

"It's another revenue stream that could be beneficial to the county," he said.

"In the future this could lessen the amount that property taxes would need to be raised."

Tunncliffe said the conversation began when a few of his constituents, including Shiflett and Coggin, approached him about using the adequate facilities tax for commercial businesses.

"I have heard the argument that to do so would limit growth," Tunncliffe said. "However the response from many in District 7 is, 'well ... this would help us catch up on improving our roads and infrastructure.' The educational impact fee did not seem to slow growth, and I am not sure this would not either."

Williamson County Mayor Rogers Anderson said the conversation about the adequate facilities tax comes up every several years.

"In the past (the county commission) took a look at it and chose not to pursue it because they wanted to remain a business-friendly community," Anderson said.

Anderson said the County Commission Tax Study Committee will most likely address the issue at its next meeting at 4:30 p.m. July 2 in the county boardroom.

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