

# Debate begins on sales tax for juvi center

The county-wide election on March 1 will ask voters if they want to reduce the sales tax for the Children's Justice Center

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As they count down to a March 1 election, those both for and against a proposed countywide sales tax cut met for the first of two joint forums.

Held during Canadian County Republicans' regular monthly meeting, the Jan. 26 forum featured all three commissioners — David Anderson, Jack Stewart and Marc Hader — as well as Bill Alexander, co-director of the Gary E. Miller Canadian County Children's Justice Center. It is a tax dedicated to the justice center which could be cut, by 15 percent, if voters approve a resolution floated by commissioners.

Voters will consider a .05 of a cent reduction of the tax, historically .35 of a cent since it was approved by residents in 1996. While estimates of how much money that would actually put into residents' pockets if the tax cut passes, both sides estimated it could run about 51 cents per month.

"It's not a simple calculation because you have people who spend in the county who don't live here and other factors like that," Stewart, the District 3 Commissioner, said. "It really depends on how much you spend here in Canadian County."

The countywide tax is just one part of spending assessments across the county. Most Canadian County cities assess a 4 percent tax, which is used

to fund many of their operations; the state of Oklahoma takes on the largest share — 4.5 percent. Piedmont has a 5 percent city sales tax rate.

Because the county has the justice center sales tax, commissioners were able to enact a matching .35 of a cent use tax, which is assessed on purchases made here but by someone outside the county, common in construction work and other industries, as well as online shopping done by residents.

Alexander said whatever the actual cost to residents, it is by all agreement less than \$1 a month per person, while conservative commissioners' numbers place the loss of income to the justice center, if the cut is approved, at \$972,000 annually.

"That could be catastrophic to us because their numbers just are not something you can say will certainly stay at that level," Alexander said.

Commissioners have used a 20-year average of a tax that far surpassed any expectations when voters passed it in 1996, Anderson said. The District 2 Commissioner said he pushed for the reduction to .30 of a cent because he wanted to give residents the opportunity to weigh in on the amount the tax they pay — and the way the center could evolve in the future.

"It's simply a matter of having the voters tell us — do they want to leave the



Canadian County Commissioners spoke at a forum regarding the upcoming March 1 election, which will ask voters if they want to reduce a sales tax dedicated to the Gary E. Miller Canadian County Children's Justice Center. The forum was hosted by the Canadian County Republicans' regular monthly meeting.

tax as it is and allow the center and its programs to grow with it, to whatever the tax allows, or do they want to scale back on the tax, but still allow the center to continue with what it's doing now," he said.

Some residents have expressed concern about the center's expansion beyond what anyone expected when the tax passed in 1996, Stewart said.

"A lot of citizens have asked what we're going to do with this runaway juvenile center," he said.

Other county officials have said they have not heard about complaints like that and Stewart said he couldn't give specifics of who told him that; center officials said any expansion was driven solely by the needs of residents.

"They act sometimes like

we're stealing this money or something — but you give us this money to use for juvenile needs," Alexander said. "Everyone talks about how much this county is growing, it's the fastest growing county, but also think about how things have changed in our society and how that has impacted our kids."

Some of those people attending the meeting asked for statistics that could show how successful the center has been in dealing with juvenile offenders. Because those records were sealed, that wasn't an easy task, Alexander said.

"We believe we are more effective than other counties in Oklahoma that have juvenile detention facilities because we lack the kids up sooner — the judge wants to give them a taste of

what it's like to lose their freedom," Alexander said. "But, it's difficult to give you a black and white, definitive number because we just don't know."

Canadian County Undersheriff Chris West said he believed he could shed at least some light on that question. In a state where incarcerated adults average four for every 1,000 people living in a county, which would be 520 prisoners here, the county jail on Monday housed 222 people, including some housed because of space constraints in other counties.

"I'm not saying it's all because of the juvenile justice center but you can't say it's not part of it," West said.

County Clerk Marie Ramsey agreed. "I think it would be

interesting to come up with information about juveniles in the programs who have not reoffended — I know a lot have gotten their life on the right track," she said.

Anderson said commissioners did not debate the center's success — that allowing residents to cast a vote on the tax's continuation was simply the right thing for them to do, as rewards of county monies.

"We said no matter how this goes, it's a win because we've allowed the citizens to tell us what they want," he said.

The question will be part of the presidential primary ballot on March 1. Anyone wishing to vote in the election must register by Friday, Feb. 5. Canadian County Election Board Secretary Wanda Arnold said.