

Benton, Franklin commissioners promise mental health facility

Benton, Franklin commissioners promise mental health facility

BY CAMERON PROBERT

CPROBERT@TRICITYHERALD.COM

PASCO, WA Benton County will provide a place for people to seek mental health and drug addiction.

But it's not clear whether taxpayers will be asked to pay extra when they buy items in the Tri-Cities. Or if they will vote on cutting some of the sales tax that now goes to Ben Franklin Transit.

The two proposals brought more than a dozen people, including police, councilmen and a former mayor, to speak during a joint Benton and Franklin commissioner meeting Wednesday morning.

The Benton and Franklin commissioners are looking to add a 0.1% sales tax to run a recovery center to serve both counties.

State law allows the commissioners to approve the measure without sending it to voters. It would cost 1 cent more for every \$10 spent and raise millions to pay for operating costs at the new facility.

As a way to avoid increasing the taxes, they propose asking the Ben Franklin Transit Board to put a measure on the ballot to trim the same amount in sales tax from Tri-Cities bus services.

Three county commissioners, Clint Didier, Rocky Mullen and Shon Small, serve on the nine-member Ben Franklin Transit Board.

In the early stretches of the two-hour discussion, commissioners from both sides of the river spoke in favor of the measure, and also supported a new treatment and mental health facility.

"I do believe that taking the 0.1 of 1 percent from transit is going to better serve the community," Mullen said.

Support for the new mental health and drug treatment facility was universal from the crowd, including drawing support from Franklin Sheriff Jim Raymond, Pasco Police Chief Ken Roske and West Richland Police Chief Ben Majetich.

But most of the speakers did not want the commissioners cutting potential bus services. They said the measure would hurt one community in need of help to serve another community needing help, and in some cases, could impact the same people.

Benton County Commissioner Shon Small, a former sheriff's deputy, supports the new facility, saying that mental health issues and drug addiction frequently come together.

"We all know that people are suffering," Majetich said. "Our police officers are suffering trying to hold this at bay. What I would urge is for you to be decisive."

People are already paying the cost of this through jail costs. He said law enforcement have been made scapegoats for the problem.

"This is a critical issue for us in this community," Roske said. "I think law enforcement has been ringing this bell for a while now. ... I'm not sure if you have anything more important on your plate."

Raymond, a longtime supporter of creating a treatment facility, urged the commissioners to put the mental health tax in place. He didn't want the commissioners to wait until they had approval on cutting the transit tax.

"I don't think anyone is going to be concerned that they have to pay an extra penny on (10 dollars)," he said. "We all just need to get along and work on this problem and fix it."

TRANSIT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Several of people who spoke in favor of having a mental health treatment facility, also said the commissioners didn't need to shift money away from transit to pay for it.

Transit Board Chair Richard Bloom said Ben Franklin Transit is being made a victim of their stewardship of the tax dollars. When the West Richland councilman started on the board more than 11 years ago, they only had \$1 million in reserves.

Since then the service has made sure to increase its reserves, and is working on funding a capital improvement plan.

The transit district isn't able to sell bonds, so any buildings, buses or shelters need to come from the revenue sources they get.

He called the potential cut to the service's budget "significant."

Pasco Councilman Ruben Alvarado, Kennewick Councilman Chuck Torelli and former Pasco Mayor Matt Watkins all said the commissioners didn't need to cut transit to fund mental health.

Alvarado, who is also a member of the board, took time off of work to come to the meeting, but said many of the people in his district did not have that option.

The service expanding into his neighborhood and people started to widely use the service.

“The complaint isn't that we have too good of services. People don't ride it because it's not good enough,” Alvarado said.

Watkins said potential employers looking at the area may find a different place to locate if there's a weak transit system for their workers.

After the public comment, Peck was the only commissioner to speak. He was skeptical that trimming the 0.1 of 1 percent from the transit agency would mean a large cut in services.

But he promised to find out the truth from the transit district about how the money is being spent. Something he said has been hard to accomplish.

“I'm not claiming to have all of the answers,” he said. “If I'm wrong, nobody wants to hear it more than me.”

CAMERON PROBERT: 509-582-1402, @CAMERONCPROBERT