

# Tri-Cities voters won't see transit sales tax cut on their ballots



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Benton and Franklin county commissioners asked the Tri-Cities transit service to cut about \$7.6 million in revenue.

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Kennewick, WA Voters will not be asked to cut their Ben Franklin Transit tax bill with the intent of using the money instead for mental health services.

Seven members of the nine-person board attending the recent transit board meeting voted unanimously against the proposal.

But the decision won't slow plans to create a new mental health and drug treatment facility for the two counties, said Benton County Commissioner Jerome Delvin.

The transit board rejected asking voters to trim 0.1% of the 0.6% the system currently collects from purchases. That would have cut about \$7.6 million from transit system budget.

“We are confident that the board as thoroughly considered the possible impacts on the transit agency and the public we serve and made the best possible decision for our community,” said Gloria Boyce, Ben Franklin Transit’s general manager in a news release. “Our board is made up of elected officials from each city and county we serve and they are committed to the best interest of the community they represented.”

Benton and Franklin county commissioners asked the agency to allow voters to decide on the cut, saying that in exchange they would approve a 0.1% sales tax increase for mental health services.

The money would pay the operating costs of a new facility that is planned in Benton County. The commissioners can approve that sales tax increase of 1 cent on a \$10 purchase without voter approval.

While most of the transit board members agreed, Franklin County Commissioner Clint Didier remained unconvinced that the transit service is cost effective.

Didier, who couldn’t be at the meeting because of a family emergency, later told the Herald he felt

the taxpayers should be given the choice of whether they felt their taxes would be better spent on something else.

“There has to be a consensus of the board to allow the people, the taxpayers, the ability to choose,” he said. “To not give them an opportunity to vote on this is a travesty.”

#### Transit Finances

About \$35 million of transit’s \$44 million operating budget comes from the sales tax. Another \$5 million from the tax is placed in a capital improvements fund.

Unlike other government agencies, the transit service cannot sell bonds to pay for buses, to build shelters or to construct buildings.

Transit officials estimated with the sales tax cut, would cost the system \$39 million over five years. If they cut the money out of the operating budget, the service would be cut by an estimated 15 percent, and likely lead to laying off about 62 employees.

And capital budget cuts would mean putting off any plans for new buildings.

And taking money from both operations and capital projects would mean stopping any expansion of services, half of the capital projects would be put on hold and about 32 positions would be cut.

But Didier remained skeptical. He said the transit district has millions in reserves it could use to support itself.

Mental health, drug center

While the cut in the transit tax has been tied to an increase in mental health sales tax, Delvin said there was no change in the plans for a new mental health and drug treatment center.

The commissioners are waiting for the results of a study looking at whether it's feasible to build the recovery center on 10th Avenue in Kennewick or if it should go somewhere else.

The results are expected to be discussed at an Aug. 31 meeting, and Delvin expected a discussion of the mental health sales tax at the same time.

The county received \$2.7 million from the state to help with the Tri-Cities project.

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