

Franklin wants voters to cut transit sales tax to pay for mental health



Bob Brawdy Tri-City Herald

Benton and Franklin county commissioners meet this week to discuss asking voters to cut the sales tax collected by Ben Franklin Transit.

Franklin wants voters to cut Tri-Cities transit for mental health

BY CAMERON PROBERT

CPROBERT@TRICITYHERALD.COM

PASCO, WA Franklin County commissioners are leading an effort to cut the sales taxes collected by the Tri-Cities public transit system and use it for mental health services instead.

The three commissioners don't often agree on much but Wednesday they're expected to join forces in trying to get support for the plan from their Benton County peers.

The two county commissions meet in a special joint session June 2 at the HAPO Center, the former TRAC building at 6600 Burden Blvd. in Pasco. The six commissioners also plan to talk about needed renovations at the joint Benton-Franklin Juvenile Justice Center.

The transit system discussion is set for 9 a.m. The meeting will be broadcast [on the Franklin County website](#).

Franklin County wants to ask voters to cut 0.1% of the 0.6% in sales taxes that Ben Franklin Transit currently receives.

Voters approved half of the tax in 1981 and the other half in 2002 to pay for fixed bus routes, Dial-A-Ride services for the disabled, vanpool programs for commuters and other services.

If voters agree to cut the tax, then the counties can impose a 0.1% sales tax increase without a public vote to pay for mental health services, including a proposed combined drug treatment and mental health facility.

That way the cost to shoppers would stay the same, they argue.

Benton County commissioners have been silent on the issue during their recent meetings. However, the previous two times the idea was raised at joint sessions with Franklin County, the majority of the Benton commissioners rejected the idea.

Ben Franklin Transit leaders are waiting until after Wednesday's meeting to weigh in on the proposal, including how much it would affect services, said an agency spokesperson.

Franklin County commissioners Clint Didier and Rocky Mullen both sit on the transit board and have been critical lately of its management and spending. Commissioner Brad Peck has long questioned the amount of taxes that the agency receives.

TRANSIT SERVICES

The transit system runs 18 inter-city routes from Prosser to Kennewick in Benton County and crosses the river into Pasco, [according to a financial statement from the transit service](#).

The routes gave Tri-Citians 2.1 million rides in 2019. That was more the two-thirds of the transit system's 3.1 million rides that year before COVID shutdowns, according to its financial statements.

About \$35 million — the bulk of the system's \$44 million budget — comes from the 0.6 percent sales tax.

Franklin County commissioners don't believe the bus system needs that much.

While they say they support services like Dial-A-Ride, they say the transit buses traveling through the city are a waste of money.

The transit system receives \$5 million less than [Franklin County's current expense budget](#), which pays for much of the county's operations, including the sheriff's office, jail, assessor's, auditor's and treasurer's offices.

They are hoping their peers across the river agree.

The commissioners are expected to vote on whether they support trying to get the tax-cutting measure on the ballot.

Franklin County Administrator Keith Johnson said the transit board wouldn't necessarily be involved with placing the issue before voters.

The board, which oversees Ben Franklin Transit, is made up of three county commissioners and representatives from the Tri-Cities, as well as officials from Prosser and Benton City.

Whether Tri-Cities voters approve a sales tax cut or not, county commissioners can impose a 0.1% sales tax increase for mental health services under a recent Washington state law.

Commissioners have not said what a mental health tax would be spent on, but it may go toward a proposed Two Rivers Behavior Health Recovery Center.

The Kennewick Hospital District Board is talking about buying and converting the Trios Women's and Children's Hospital on Auburn Street in Kennewick into a recovery center, which would help people with substance abuse recovery and provide mental health services.

In addition to construction costs to remodel the old hospital or to build a new center, there would be unreimbursed costs for operating the facility.

Those costs would include security for the portion of the building used for detoxification and residential treatment of people being held by law enforcement.

The Benton County Commission has contracted with Wave Design Group to evaluate the Auburn Street building, using some of the \$2.75 million allocated by the state Legislature to kick start a project to open a substance use treatment center for the Tri-Cities area.

The report to the county will include estimated repair costs for the old hospital building or building replacement costs and the estimated lifespan and future replacement costs.

Benton County is still considering what its participation will be in the proposed Two Rivers Behavioral Health Recovery Center. They have discussed building a new building.

It is dependent on the engineering review of the hospital and what county officials learn in a planned trip to Arizona to understand more about RI International and see a facility it operates. The company is a potential service provider for the proposed recovery center.

JUVENILE JUSTICE CENTER

Along with talking about changing Ben Franklin Transit funding, the two sets of commissioners will be talking about updating the Benton-Franklin Juvenile Justice Center off Canal Drive in Kennewick.

The oldest sections of the building were built in the '70s, and the newer sections date to the '90s.

The heating and air conditioning systems, courtroom and detention center all need renovation or repairs.

CAMERON PROBERT: 509-582-1402, @CAMERONCPROBERT