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County proposes 8.9 mill tax hike to pay for court deputies, security

By Jenny Hartley/Senior Reporter

The Lancaster County Courthouse burned down, and now residents' taxes are going up.

County Council has been talking for the last several weeks about a tax increase, to cover about \$2 million in costs associated with increased security needs and court relocation costs due to the Aug. 4 courthouse fire, which authorities say was set by an arsonist.

The council is looking to increase taxes by 8.9 mills, which equals a \$35.60 increase in taxes on a \$100,000 home.

Increase pays for deputies

The bulk of the tax increase is to pay for deputies for the Lancaster County Sheriff's Office. The new deputies will provide security during general sessions, civil, family, probate and magistrate's court, and will also guard government buildings where court records are stored 24 hours a day.

Right now, deputies are working overtime to provide security at the Family Court Building on Catawba Street and County Administration Building on Main Street. Offices displaced by the courthouse fire and a second arson a few days later at 6th Circuit Solicitor Doug Barfield's Dunlap Street office have been moved into the County Administration Building.

It will cost \$726,000 a year for a court unit for the sheriff's office. The one-time cost to hire these deputies is \$434,000, totaling almost \$1.2 million. It will cost another estimated \$450,000 to pay deputies now working overtime to guard county buildings.

Chief Deputy Barry Faile told council members Monday night that deputies have worked 900 hours of overtime in guarding the County Administration Building, the Family Court Building and the courthouse remains, which will be restored.

The deputies have no choice. Circuit Judge Brooks Goldsmith issued an order after the fires, in coordination with S.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Jean Toal, that deputies will guard the buildings around the clock until further notice. The Lancaster Police Department is assisting with security.

Other costs

Technical security upgrades at county buildings will cost another \$150,000 in one-time costs. County Administrator Steve Willis said specific security measures cannot be discussed and are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act.

To relocate court functions and offices until a new courthouse is built will cost \$175,000 a year for four years, and \$75,000 for one-time upgrades to a temporary location. Officials are still looking for a suitable location, Willis said.

The extra deputies and security upgrades likely won't be a choice for the county. Toal visited county buildings Thursday and will likely issue an administrative order on what the county needs to do, Willis said.

The state Judicial Department and State Law Enforcement Division issued standard operating guidelines for court security in 2006, Willis said. The county is not in compliance with those guidelines right now.

"We see what a lack of security has done," Toal said last week. "Security is not an option."

Council unanimously approves increase

Approving second reading of a large tax hike didn't come easy for County Council members Monday night.

“It was probably one of the most bitter pills I’ve had to swallow while on council,” said council chairman Rudy Carter on Tuesday. “When the arsonist struck that match, he brought our world down.”

Councilman Wayne Kersey said at Monday’s meeting that he was not against the proposal, but asked if some of the one-time costs could come out of the county’s general fund. He said the council was looking at levying more taxes “on some of the most struggling people in the state of South Carolina.”

Councilman Fred Thomas said it was a very difficult decision to make, and he didn’t like the fact that the new deputies will be limited to court-related duties only.

“Please don’t feel safer when you go home,” Thomas said. “None of those deputies will be used to ride around in patrol cars.”

Council unanimously approved second reading of an ordinance that includes an extra .2 percent of a mill for University of South Carolina at Lancaster and the York Technical College Kershaw campus, and increasing taxes by an unspecified amount.

The specific amount of taxes will be set before third reading. Third reading will be held during a special meeting Sept. 15. A public hearing on the tax increase will be held during that meeting.

“I still don’t like it,” Thomas said after Monday night’s vote.

“I don’t like it either,” Councilman Larry Honeycutt said. “But I don’t like them burning down our courthouse and doing what they’re doing in our county. The buck stops here.”

By the numbers

County Council is considering an 8.9 mills tax hike. What this means for you if you own:

- A \$100,000 home = \$35.60 tax increase
- A \$150,000 home = \$53.40 tax increase
- A \$200,000 home = \$71.20 tax increase
- A \$300,000 home = \$106.80 tax increase

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