

Letter To The Editor: Jersey County Sheriff Discusses Half-Cent (0.5 Percent) Increase For Public Safety Tax

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Citizens of Jersey County,

I write to discuss an upcoming ballot measure proposed by the Jersey County Board (JCB) which proposes a half cent (0.5%) increase in our public safety tax, which is currently 0.75%. That increase would amount to fifty cents per \$100 spent in the county on items other than fuel, qualifying food, medicine, medical appliances, and farm equipment used by farmers. Because it is a sales tax, visitors to our county would be

helping us with it. I know how difficult it can be as a citizen of Illinois to consider any additional tax, which is why I am setting forth the following information for your thoughtful consideration as you go to the polls on March 19:

First, when I took office as your Sheriff a year ago, I knew I would oversee the sheriff's office, jail, and court security. Still, I must admit I was a little surprised to find that according to Illinois statute, I was also responsible for the maintenance of our beloved courthouse which was built in 1893. Unfortunately, it now stands in dire need of attention in the form of critical maintenance and important security upgrades. In recent years, JCB planners focused on stopping moisture and water damage in our courthouse by replacing the roof and tuckpointing. In addition, a new heating and cooling system was required to replace an outdated, inefficient, and high maintenance system. Within the last year, we discovered that the courthouse entrance was beginning to sink due to a broken floor truss coupled with the weight of the marble entrance floor. Repairs are in progress. That sinking has cracked the threshold which, along with the entrance staircase, needs repair. The courthouse elevator, which has served the building for decades, quit, requiring expensive repairs which are also in progress. Finally, a recent inspection of the foundation revealed that long term water damage to the foundation may pose problems in coming years.

Second, because our courthouse and jail, along with our county government building, were designed and built in different eras, our security has grown inadequate. Today, we face much different security challenges and emerging threats in a society scarred by senseless violence, active shooters, and terrorism. I am pleased to report that our county's criminal justice and government systems serve us well day in and day out, but such systems have needs. For example, while we often focus on the threats law enforcement officers face, we must not forget that our county's Judge and other public officials and employees face similar threats as they deal with regular conflict, emotion, and hostility on the jobs we ask them to do. This is not to mention our fellow citizens who are conducting business in our courthouse and multiple government buildings for which we are responsible. Unlike law enforcement officers who are trained and equipped to deal with such threats, those who work in and/or visit our courthouse and government buildings rely on the physical security offered by the personnel, equipment, and procedures the Sheriff's Office puts in place in those buildings to protect them. Cameras, metal detectors, physical barriers, etc. are more costly and more difficult to install in an 1893 building and a decades old jail not designed for such things. Yet, they are becoming absolute necessities to protect our employees and our citizens. While our jail was remodeled with an addition and upgrades in 2008, the cost of maintaining now outdated appliances and updating security measures increase each year.

Lastly, with the implementation of the Safe-T Act and other Illinois laws and mandates, fewer criminals are being jailed. Instead, they are being released with no cash bail.

Money from forfeited bails, criminal fines, and court fees are decreasing. More importantly, criminals are being returned to our communities where they often reoffend until such time that they are incarcerated. This requires the JCSO to spend more time and resources, while also developing new techniques and efforts, to keep track of those criminals and prevent future crime in our county. I would be lying if I did not tell you that these changing times may require additional manpower needs in the future to make our county as safe as it can be. The addition of law enforcement officers could be an added benefit of this tax if the needs of our buildings are adequately addressed.

Together, we must ensure our courthouse, jail, and government building are adequately maintained and properly secured. Maintenance and security needs in our public safety buildings require considerable funds which are often difficult to anticipate from budget to budget. The JCB and I are committed to finding ways to make and keep our buildings safe and secure as long as possible. That requires funding. Perhaps, most importantly, I ask all of you to join me in thinking about our future. As much as we love our courthouse, we must remember it was built in 1893. Our jail and other government buildings are also aging. Will those buildings meet our needs in twenty, even ten, years in their current condition and considering our future public safety needs and threats? If the answer is no, we must think about saving for that future now or leave yet another burden to our children. From what I have seen, saving money for that future will require additional funding.

I do not believe it is my place as a law enforcement officer to oppose or advocate on behalf of any tax. It is, however, my job to inform the public of issues we are facing as a community. At the end of the day, I will answer to and respect your wishes and judgement. An increase in the public safety portion of our sales tax is one viable way to address our needs and to distribute our burden across all our taxpayers and those who visit and do business in our county. For all these reasons, I am respectfully asking you to give this measure your thoughtful consideration. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Nicholas J. Manns

Sheriff

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