As first appearing in the Columbia Daily Tribune:

This November, many Columbia residents will be concerned about whether the football Tigers will finish off their SEC schedule in a winning fashion. They might not give much thought to the looming decision of whether to increase their own property taxes by 30 cents per $100 of assessed value over the next five years. If passed, after the fifth year the average Columbia homeowner would see an $88 increase in their property taxes. The money from this tax increase would further fund public safety.

Public safety is clearly a major public good, and it should have sufficient funds to deliver adequate services to the residents of Columbia. However, there are good reasons to believe that a 73 percent increase in property taxes, not 4 percent as one proponent has claimed, is not necessary at this time. Below are some pros and cons to this proposed tax increase.

PRO:
Proponents of the tax increase correctly state that the number of police officers per 1,000 residents has declined over the past several years. Coupled with this decrease in the ratio of police to residents, the inflation-adjusted budget for the police department has declined as well. This means that a decreasing number of police have fewer financial resources while serving an increasing population.

CON:

These decreases in funding and personnel, detractors argue, have not led to an increase in crime. According to the FBI, in Columbia total crime per 100,000 residents has declined slightly since 2009. There has been a much larger drop in violent crime since 2009. More officers might make crime decrease even further, but that is no guarantee. Many cities in Missouri have more police per 1,000 residents and more crime as well.

PRO:

Columbia has fewer firefighters than comparable Midwest towns. Also, firefighter response times are increasing as more Columbia residents have moved farther away from fire stations.

CON:

With the exception of 2012, the number of fires in Columbia has been on a steady decline. This decrease in the number of fires is coupled to a budget that continues to increase, even when adjusted for inflation.

There are other options for Columbia residents to consider if the November measure fails. For instance, the city could look at the fire expense reimbursement it receives for services performed for the three colleges in town. According to the Columbia budget, these reimbursements are projected to decline in the next few years. Columbia can renegotiate with these colleges in order to get higher reimbursements.

Columbia could privatize its water and electric utilities. The sale of these utilities not only would bring in immediate money, but it also would expand the property tax base, which would generate more funds for the police and fire departments.

Voters in Columbia have a lot to think about when considering whether to raise property taxes this November. There are reasonable points for and against this proposal. Whether the tax increase passes or fails, there still are other methods for raising revenue in the city. City residents should not think their only option going forward is to increase taxes or cut back on public safety services.

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