

Tax Hike Measure Advances

A plan to ask voters to raise the sales levy to pay for more police is sent to full council for debate.

By Steve Hymon
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A proposed ballot measure to increase the Los Angeles sales tax by a half cent to hire more police officers moved forward Tuesday, when two committees voted to send the issue to the full City Council for debate.

The council has until Jan. 26 to decide whether to place the measure on the May ballot.

A similar countywide measure failed in November but had strong support among voters living in Los Angeles.

Councilman Eric Garcetti said he wasn't sure the measure was a good idea so soon after the November defeat, but that new polling numbers showed that it could pass.

"I'm keeping the option open," he said.

Real estate developer Rick Caruso, a supporter of the tax increase, said Tuesday that a poll he personally commissioned of 1,000 likely voters showed that 69% to 73% of them would support a tax increase. He said the poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1%.

"What's the point of waiting?" Caruso said. "You'll never get this passed countywide. If Los Angeles has a problem, why not deal with it now? Why push it off into the future?"

A tax increase would require approval by two-thirds of the city's voters.

The money would be used to hire 1,200 police officers in Los Angeles, add more paramedics and expand anti-gang programs, among other things.

The ratio of police to residents in Los Angeles has for decades lagged behind that of other major cities.

"I'm in favor of anything that will get us relief as quickly as possible," Police Chief William J. Bratton told the joint meeting of the council's Budget And Finance Committee and Public Safety Committee.

Councilman Alex Padilla abandoned a plan he had floated this month to ask for a sales tax increase but to allow the money to go into the city's general fund — meaning there would be no guarantee it would be used as voters intended.

The advantage of that approach, he had argued, was that it would require only a simple majority to pass.

Padilla told panel members that his proposal had received little support, and that the council must be united before asking residents for a tax increase.

"I still stand by my proposal as the way to get it done," Padilla said later. "But right now, I see 15 different council members going in 15 different directions. That's a recipe for disaster."

The proposed sales tax increase faces many barriers before going to voters.

Business interests are expected to oppose any increase, saying it would drive consumers to other cities for expensive purchases. Neighborhood councils might not go for it without assurances that more officers would be assigned to their districts.