

County agenda hectic in 2004



MICHELLE A. FOX
NEWS-SUN

In the past year, Lea County has seen increasing taxes, searching for a new county manager and building the new jail

All those projects have kept commissioners' plates full.

In 2004, the county instituted two tax increases, both a result of a tight budget caused by building a new jail.

The first of the new taxes was a one-sixteenth percent raise of the gross receipts tax in the county. While this may not seem like a significant increase, the money generated will allow the county to keep operating the four county convenience centers at no cost to the public. It costs the county \$400,000 a year to run them. When the decision was made to institute the tax increase, commissioners were afraid that if a charge was placed on the users, they would throw their trash around the county.

"Through this tax we are able to have places where the citizens can dump their trash and have it transferred to the landfill," said Commission Chairman Harry Teague. "The long-range benefits are going to be its cosmetic value to the county and the convenience to the community."

The second tax was a 2 mill levy increase on property.

Prior to the new year, Lea County had one of the lowest property tax rates in the state at 8.6 percent. With the 2-mill increase, it is now the 12th highest at 10.6 percent.

The increase is expected to raise \$2.4 million in revenue and should help the county's cash reserves.

"The money generated from the mill levy will

Members of the Lea County Commission listen to one of the many issues facing its citizens at a recent meeting. Over the past year, the

go directly to the Road Department for building roads," said Darrold Stephenson, Lea County commissioner. "The oilfield is paying our taxes anyway. They should have the comfort of riding down a good road."

With more than 1,300 miles of roads in Lea County, there are always ones that need maintenance — especially chipsealing.

Newly elected Commissioner Randy McCormick has been at the front of making sure the county maintains the roads — taking the torch from his predecessor, Ross Black.

"We are working with the county Road Department to see that the needed repairs get done," McCormick said. "All the recent rainfall has taken a toll on our county roads."

In the last five years, the county has chipsealed only 69 miles of roads. On top of that, there are more than 730 miles of unpaved country roads.

The money from the 2 mill levy, however, will not be applied to the Road Department for two years. Until then the money will go directly into the county budget to help fix the money problems caused by the new jail construction.

"The 2 mill was necessary for us to meet our budget in the short term because we took too long to implement taxes on services we provide," said Teague. "In a couple of years when that immediate need is taken care of, that 2 mill will allow us to chipseal several miles of road

commission has instituted changes such as increasing property taxes and construction a new county jail.

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each year."

According to Teague, the 2 mill will also help reduce costs to run the Road Department.

The detention facility construction is another reason the budget needed a quick fix.

In November 2003, Lea County broke ground on a \$21 million, 432-bed jail to replace the current Lea County Detention Facility. Out of the total cost, \$7 million came from the county's cash reserves.

And while the facility has cost the county millions of dollars initially, over the years of its operation, it expected to generate revenue through a contract to house United States Marshal's Office inmates.

"We are guaranteed at least 90 federal inmates," said Stephenson.

That guarantee of prisoners at a rate of \$65.50 per day per prisoner should generate around \$2.5 million a year for the prison. If needed, there are a total of 100 beds that can be used for the federal prisoners.

"The new detention facility will be the first in Lea County to almost pay for itself," Teague said. "With the Marshal's contract, there will be annual savings of \$1.5 million a year to taxpayers."

County commissioners also find themselves looking for a brand new city manager. In November, the county manager of 10 years,

Dennis Holmberg, resigned. Since then a list of 28 applicants has been narrowed down to five — including co-interim managers Rick Bruce and Bill Gatchell. As an at-will employee, there was no contract holding Holmberg in the position or obligating the county to pay any sum of money to him upon his departure.

"I am in no hurry to find a manager," Teague said. "I am very pleased with our department heads and believe we can go a long time without a county manager."

Effective March 1, Lea County residents will also see a \$7 increase in the fees they pay to use the landfill. Once the lowest tipping fees in the state at \$17.50, the new rate will be just over \$24.

Fees had to be raised, according to Jerry Reynolds, Environmental Services director, because money would be needed to build the third cell at the landfill sooner than originally planned.

"The newest cell is only five acres and should last right around two years," Reynolds said. "We will have to start building the next cell about three months before we are ready to use it."

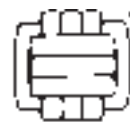
While excavating the second cell, workers ran into problems removing materials from the ground. When this was brought to the attention of the Solid Waste Authority, the decision was made to truncate the second cell and build what could be built.



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