

Neighborhood groups fight for chunk of proposed sales tax hike



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“1, 2, 3: great neighborhoods.”

That’s the rallying cry for a coalition of 27 neighborhood groups that want to make sure established neighborhoods get their share of the \$22 million that a half-cent hike in the city’s sales tax would bring in each year.

The 1, 2, 3? That’s:

* \$1 million for a fund to buy problem properties

and get them torn down or cleaned up.

* \$2 million for sidewalks, which are in disrepair in established neighborhoods across the city.

* \$3 million for parks, which have lost funding for renovation and improvements.

“That \$6 million is very fair,” said Shawn Ryba, chief operating officer of NeighborWorks, a nonprofit group that helps revitalize established neighborhoods in the city.

Business groups, such as the Lincoln Independent Business Association, homebuilders and the Chamber of Commerce, which generally support spending money on new roads, have already lobbied to get money earmarked for streets, including building the south beltway, Ryba said.

So it’s only right that neighborhood groups ask city leaders to use some of that money for neighborhood priorities and needs.

The 27 neighborhood groups — members of the Lincoln Policy Network — are endorsing the “1, 2, 3” plan and helping to promote it.

They would like to talk with other groups about neighborhood needs and convince voters a hike in the sales tax will pay dividends.

New neighborhoods, like Fallbrook in north Lincoln, show Lincoln’s growth. But the established neighborhoods represent the overall health of the town, said Irvingdale Neighborhood president Larry Evermann.

Evermann said he could support a half-cent increase in the city’s sales tax as long as the neighborhoods’ three priorities are included.

Councilman Jon Camp calls this idea — combining several community needs into one tax promotion package — the Christmas tree effect. Add enough presents under the half-cent sales tax Christmas tree, and the idea is more likely to win voter approval, said Camp, who opposes the sales tax hike.

Rick Hoppe, the mayor's chief of staff, prefers describing it as looking for community consensus on a tax package.

Members of Mayor Chris Beutler's staff have been talking with a number of groups to test support and get ideas for how to use a potential increase in the sales tax.

The ideas being mentioned include property tax relief, occupation tax relief, money for road maintenance and new roads including the south beltway, new fire stations, 911 communications equipment, economic development and community learning centers, which host after-school programs.

"This is very much in the discussion stage," said Hoppe, who has been handling the presentations.

The mayor's staff is still unsure whether the administration will seek voter approval for the half-cent increase, which would raise the city's sales tax to 2 percent and the total sales tax to 7.5 percent.

If the mayor moves forward, he will need approval from five of the seven council members to put the issue on the November ballot. Then he will need voter approval for the increase and a plan for using the estimated \$22 million.

State law requires that most of the money be earmarked for buildings, equipment, roads or tax relief. But 15 percent can be used for programs run jointly with another public entity.

The "1,2, 3: great neighborhoods" is a bit of a gimmick, Ryba acknowledged. But the neighborhoods are quite serious about talking with other groups and being included in the tax hike proposal.

"This is an opportunity for all of us to have a conversation, to come up with a comprehensive approach," Ryba said.

One of the targets — \$1 million for problem properties — would give the city a new tool for an old problem.

Problem properties — homes that owners can't or won't maintain and that are neighborhood eyesores — are a particular challenge for older neighborhoods, Evermann said.

Part of the sales tax money, \$1 million a year, would go into a fund so the city could move more quickly and purchase some of the problem homes, Ryba said.

Sidewalks are also a major concern in established neighborhoods. There is about \$60 million worth of repairs needed on 1,500 miles of sidewalks, which would require spending \$2.5 million a year to keep up, based on a city analysis.

The city's parks have been operating on fumes for several years, with funding for maintenance and improvements at close to zero, Ryba said.

"We think it is just as important to invest in your people as to invest in roads," he said.