

# City tax proposal needs public vote

JUL 27 1995  
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Rapid City may decide to use a half-cent city sales tax beginning in 1995 to fund economic development in and around the city.

The plan may be a good one. Before there is a public outcry against it, there should be public understanding about it. That understanding can begin through attending one of three public meetings being held during the first week in August. There, the plan will be outlined and discussed.

Also, before imposing the half-cent tax, the city should seek approval from city voters. Without receiving that permission, the city should not consider using the sales tax approach to fund the economic development incentive program.

The current half-cent sales tax has been used to fund the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center expansion. That tax was to expire in 1995. Now, it is proposed to continue it for five additional years, creating a pool of about \$12 million for economic development.

That pool of funds would be useful. It might be the best investment the city's people ever make. But it is their money, not the city's.

Several years ago, city voters wisely approved taxing themselves a half-cent to build the new airport terminal and otherwise spruce up the city with necessary improvements. The economic development funding proposal should likewise be decided by city voters.

If a tax is supposed to "sunset" — expire when its purpose has been served — it is unfair to continue it without the consent of the people who initially approved it. When such a tax is continued, even for an equally good purpose — and there are always worthy projects — it erodes trust in the leadership that sold the tax on the basis of its temporary nature. That harms the relationship between governors and governed.

City officials should make their case to the public and let the people decide. By planning to put the measure to a vote from the outset, the question can be decided in conjunction with a regularly scheduled election. That way, we avoid the needless costs of a special election.

If voters reject the tax, that won't kill the entire concept. But it should settle the matter of using a special half-cent tax to fund it.

To the city's credit, it has scheduled three meetings to give people a chance to learn about the economic development proposal before the matter goes any further.

The initial informational meetings are all scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. They will be held on the following dates and places:

- **Wednesday, Aug. 1**, in the West Conference Room on the third floor of the city /school administration building (new city hall) on Omaha Street across from Memorial Park.
- **Thursday, Aug. 2**, in the Rapid City Common Council chambers on the second floor of the city/school building.
- **Tuesday, Aug. 7**, in the Montana-Dakota Utilities hospitality room at 703 Kansas City Street.

Attending meetings, asking questions, and following the matter through the media are all means of becoming informed. Rapid City residents may accept, modify or reject the concept, but they should make their individual decisions on an informed basis.