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Conveyance fee on home sales is doubled

Wednesday, December 14, 2005

ROBERT VITALE
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

People who sell their homes will pay twice as much in fees to Franklin County under an increase approved yesterday during a heated county commissioners meeting.

Democrats Mary Jo Kilroy and Paula Brooks voted for the extra charge, which will double, for instance, the \$150 paid by the person who sells a \$150,000 home. The so-called conveyance fee, applied to all real-estate sales, will be charged at a rate of \$2 for every \$1,000 of the sale price. The fee now is \$1 per \$1,000, among the lowest in Ohio.

The increase takes effect Jan. 12.

Republican Dewey Stokes, who also opposed a half-cent sales tax increase approved in late July, voted against the plan. He said that he agreed with county Auditor Joe Testa, a fellow Republican, who said last week that the county is collecting more than enough in taxes and fees.

The increase will raise \$6.8 million yearly if real-estate sales match 2005 estimates.

Kilroy and Brooks vowed to use the money for housing programs and services for the homeless, an idea endorsed by the Columbus Board of Realtors and other groups that previously had opposed an increase.

"We need to build up the low- and moderate-income housing in this community," Brooks said. "This is the way to do it."

Stokes and Testa, however, said an estimated \$5.2 million increase in county property-tax collections for 2006 made the conveyance-fee increase unnecessary. That money, based on a revaluation of all property in the county to reflect a booming real-estate market, was certified by the state last week.

The two sides argued yesterday not only over the fee increase, but also over whose position on it should be called conservative.

Testa and Stokes said they supported spending \$6.8 million to address affordable housing and homelessness, which is a \$4 million increase over current county funding for the Community Shelter Board and the Affordable Housing Trust for Columbus and Franklin County. But they want the money to come from what the county already collects.

Both are up for re-election in 2006.

The Democrats, however, said the \$5.2 million in extra property tax is still subject to appeals by owners and changes by the county Board of Revision.

"I'm very reluctant to spend what we don't have," Kilroy said. "We need to take a conservative outlook at our income and a realistic outlook at our future needs."

Brooks, who has blamed the county's budget problems on past Republican majorities, said Testa and Stokes advocated a "return to the same old spend, spend, spend days." She said Testa's budget estimates contained the same overly optimistic projections that got the county into fiscal trouble to begin with.

Stokes, the last member of what was an all-Republican slate of commissioners as recently as 2000, originally supported a fee increase and helped broker the compromise that won the Board of Realtors' support. He said he changed his mind after learning about the extra \$5.2 million coming in through property taxes.

"How is it conservative to raise the sales tax and then turn around and raise the conveyance fee?" he said.

Franklin County faced a \$55 million deficit when planning for the 2006 budget began. The half-cent sales-tax increase will raise an estimated \$88 million a year, while the conveyance fee increase and higher property values will bring in \$12 million.

Officials said the money will close the budget gap and rebuild cash reserves that have been used to cover unbalanced budgets since 2002. Kilroy said the county also faces big expenses for a new courts building and changes to alleviate jail overcrowding.

Testa said money exists for all of that.

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"You've got money coming out of your ears and you're still raising new taxes in this county," he said. "It's unconscionable what these folks have done."

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