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THE KANSAS CITY STAR. ★

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CITY MATTERS

Bring on the anti-tax zealots

Suddenly, Paul Danaher isn't the only anti-tax zealot on the City Council. This is a very encouraging development for Kansas City taxpayers.



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A number of Danaher's colleagues — Becky Nace, Bonnie Sue Cooper, Troy Nash, Mary Williams —

Neal and Jim Rowland — have indicated in recent statements that the city needs to look harder at cutting costs rather than raising taxes.

This talk has been needed for years at City Hall, where former Mayor Emanuel Cleaver and past councils were putting tax increase after tax increase on the ballot.

Fortunately, voters defeated the most poorly planned proposals, including one for capital improvements in 1997 and another for flood control in 1999.

Now it appears that many council members agree that boosting taxes isn't always necessary to improve basic services.

Consider what's happening with public safety. Supporters of the police and fire departments want to spend \$150 million for a new training facility for firefighters and police officers; for a new police station north of the Missouri River; and repairs for other police stations; and for fixing dilapidated fire stations.

Proponents have said that a half-cent sales tax increase, raising \$30 million annually for five years, could pay for the improvements.

But a better option exists. The city could pay for the public safety projects out of its regular budget, without boosting taxes. How? By issuing bonds to raise the needed \$150 million and ser-

vice, through annual payments of \$12 million to \$14 million for up to 20 years.

Remember, the city budget is robust. Revenues for the 2001-2002 fiscal year are expected to rise almost \$57 million over the current fiscal year. More than two-thirds of the increase — or about \$43 million — is

supposed to flow into accounts that could be used for the public safety bonds. Sure, higher costs for employees and materials could eat up a lot of these extra revenues. And interest costs would expand the total cost of the public safety projects beyond \$150 million.

But a tax increase could be avoided. Plus, Mayor Kay Barnes, the City Council and City Manager Bob Collins would be forced to find enough money for public safety by diligently sifting out lower-priority programs in the budget.

The city has taken this type of action before. In 1997, voters approved a \$110 million general obligation bond issue to install more streetlights. Taxes weren't increased. Money from the regular budget pays for the bond program.

The anti-tax movement in Kansas City also could have an ace up its sleeve. City Hall is currently spending at least \$2.4 million on consultants to find more efficient ways to spend tax revenue. The consultants claim departments will be able to provide more effective services while saving millions of dollars a year.

If that happens, much of the savings could help finance the public-

again reducing the need for a tax increase. Barnes said Thursday she was "willing to look" at using current revenues rather than higher taxes to finance the public safety projects.

So far, no one has presented compelling information that higher taxes are required to build better police and fire facilities.

Instead, if Barnes and the council determine these improvements are high priorities, they ought to pay for the projects with existing revenue sources.

Winners, losers

Council members Bonnie Sue Cooper and Jim Rowland have raised good questions about whether a new performing arts center really should be built south of Bartle Hall, bleeding even more investment outside the downtown loop. Council members need to take a stand soon on whether they will spend tens of millions of tax dollars to build parking, roads or other items sought by civic leader Julia Irene Kauffman to make the center possible.

Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt, whose team once again missed the playoffs this fall, nevertheless has boosted season ticket prices by an average of 12 percent for next fall. Hunt better be careful. He could be alienating bistate voters who, in 2002, are likely to be asked to approve \$150 million in taxpayer assistance for remodeling the Truman Sports Complex.

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