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Geneva County sales tax bill pending in Senate

BY YANG BAI
Special to the Eagle

GENEVA — Geneva County voters may soon be asked to raise the county's sales tax in

order to build a jail, possibly saving millions of dollars by avoiding a federal court order.

Rep. Donnie Chesteen, R-Geneva, is sponsoring House Bill 346. It would authorize the Geneva County Commission to levy a 1 percent sales tax, subject to a referendum, for constructing and maintaining

a jail, with any excess proceeds to be used for road and bridge projects.

According to Chesteen, if the bill passes the Legislature, the tax will be on the ballot in November and will need a simple majority vote to pass. If it passes, the sales tax will be raised to 9 percent from 8 percent, effec-

tive immediately.

"All I'm doing is just taking the resolution from the county commission, getting it in the formal legislation passed," Chesteen said, "so the people in the county have the opportunity to decide whether or not

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Bill

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they want it."

According to Fred Hamic, commission chairman and probate judge, the current Geneva County Jail was built in 1965.

"It's an old jail," Sheriff Greg Ward said.

"Inmates today are different than they were 30 years ago. There are more health problems; there is more disease. You have to have a facility that you can isolate those inmates while they're incarcerated. Unfortunately, the jail wasn't designed for that."

Deputy Sheriff Tony Helms said that although the inmates have broken the law, they are still human beings and shouldn't be subjected to bad conditions.

Helms said the current jail was originally built for 42 inmates and currently holds 56, but the number goes up at times, such as weekends when people are arrested for driving under the influence.

Ward said the cost of the new jail will depend on the number of beds and the number of single cells. Single cells are used to isolate the inmates who have contagious diseases.

"Staph's been a big issue"

in taking care of inmates and preventing disease from spreading, Ward said.

"We have inmates come in who either have AIDS or TB (tuberculosis)," Ward said. "If a hospital can get staph, do you think a jail can? Answer yes."

Asked what the county commission would do if it can't build a jail, Hamic said the commission is constitutionally required to maintain the jail. He speculated that if the commission doesn't replace the jail, it will face an order from a federal judge to close the old jail and build another one.

Hamic said the Association of County Commissions of Alabama has documented proof that whenever a federal judge gets involved, it will cost the county two to two and a half times more to build a jail than if the county built it on its own.

"If we're talking about probably a \$6-million jail for Geneva County, if we let a federal judge mandate it, it's going to cost us between \$12 and \$15 million," Hamic said.

With the proposed sales tax, a new county jail will be paid off in 15 years, Hamic said.

Besides the funding for jail construction, roads and bridges in Geneva County

also need millions of dollars for maintenance.

"Another need attached to this bill is for improved roads and bridges in Geneva County," Chesteen said.

According to County Engineer Justin Barfield, there are 500 miles of dirt roads in Geneva County and the cost of paving a dirt road is \$350,000 per mile.

Barfield said the roads and bridges budget is around \$2 million per year. The budget hasn't changed for 30 years, but the cost of fuel and equipment keeps going up, he said.

"The 1 percent (sales tax increase) would help some, but it wouldn't fix our problem with the current budget," Barfield said. "It'll definitely help the roads situation."

HB 346 passed the Alabama House of Representatives on Jan. 30. Sen. Harri Anne Smith, I-Slocumb, will push it in the Senate.

"I will do my best to pass the bill that the county commission has asked us to pass, so the people can have the vote on it," Smith said.

The sheriff said that the sales tax increase is the fairest way to deal with the problem because "this way, everybody pays the same."

People in Geneva County have different viewpoints.

"I think it's great," said

Steve Smith, a resident of Hartford.

"As long as it's for anything to do with public work, it's fine."

Ward said that he could understand that some local businessmen are afraid this tax will hurt their business.

Troy University journalism student Yang Bai of Shandong, China, wrote this story as part of a project partly funded by the Alabama Press Association Journalism Foundation.



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Mr. North," Barberree said.