

Mayor and City Council: Before passing new public safety tax, show us how the last one made Spokane safer

GUEST OPINION

BY GAVIN COOLEY

Homelessness and public safety are again the overwhelming top two concerns of Spokane voters, according to a large survey just released by Greater Spokane Inc. In the same survey, two-thirds of city voters said City Hall has enough money and just needs to spend it more effectively.

At the same time, the Spokane City Council plans an Oct. 14 vote to increase local sales taxes. The people of Spokane will not get a vote. A recent 2025 state law lets the council pass this one on its own: a one-tenth of 1% sales tax for more than \$7 million a year, with no expiration date.

This will be the second time in just two years the city has increased the sales tax for public safety: Voters approved a 0.1% tax beginning in 2025 for community safety. Back then, City Hall told us money would be spent on more police on the streets and a downtown that felt safer and that is why the Spokane Business Association supported it.

But is that what happened? Two years later, the police department appears to have fewer commissioned officers than it had when that tax passed in 2024, and the next time you get off the Division Street exit or walk downtown, ask yourself: “How did that annual \$7 million-plus tax make our community safer?”

Now look at where the proposed new tax goes. About a third pays the debt on the planned purchase of an \$18.5 million office building the City Council voted to pursue in August, pending a 90-day review. The mayor has been selling that purchase as a way to “save taxpayer dollars over the long-term,” but now City Hall wants a permanent tax to help pay for those savings – savings that need a new tax to pay for them are not usually savings.

Beyond the office building purchase, little detail has been provided on how the tax will be used. Asked at the City Council’s Oct. 6 public safety committee meeting how the new money would be spent, the city’s chief financial officer, Matt Boston, said “it’s a bit early” and that it is “going to have to be worked into the budget.” As for committing the money to specific purposes, he said, “We don’t want to get too prescribed.”

In other words, the Council is being asked to approve a permanent tax now and work out what it pays for later, even as the city faces a projected \$35.6 million budget deficit over the next two years, along with a 2026 budgeted drawdown of tens of millions of accumulated savings across the entire city organization.

Making matters worse, the Washington State Audit of the City, released just last week, raises serious questions about how the city manages the money it already collects.

The state auditor found serious financial-control weaknesses, misclassified reserves and debt payments, and errors in accounting for city assets. Most troubling was a \$4 million transfer of permit-fee revenue into general operations that auditors found unallowable under state law. Those fees are meant to support permitting services and taxpayers deserve to know why money collected to effectively process building permits was instead illegally shifted to fund general city operations.

I spent 17 years as this city’s chief financial officer. Supporting city services with new taxes, drawing down savings, and improper fund transfers is always a bad idea. It inevitably mortgages the city’s future and leaves future

administrations to clean up the mess.

Meanwhile, a carefully developed community plan for addressing safety and homelessness sits unfunded. After county voters rejected a public safety tax in 2023, leaders across the region from law enforcement, the courts, healthcare and business spent nine months on the Safe and Healthy Spokane Task Force. In June they delivered 14 recommendations aimed at addressing citizens' concerns about safety: crisis response, treatment, diversion, and housing.

Mayor Brown publicly supported all the task force recommendations. But now, just four months later, the county has approved a separate sales-tax increase and the city is pursuing one of its own. Committing those revenues to their individual budgets without a clear regional funding plan risks leaving the community with good recommendations and too little money to carry them out.

The City Council should vote “no” on Wednesday. Show us how the last tax made Spokane safer, not just where the money went. Present a sustainable budget and a credible plan to fund the region's public-safety priorities. Then take that plan to the voters. Taxpayers deserve to know how paying more will make Spokane safer.

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