

## **Task Force Recommends a Local Tax to Tackle Substance Abuse and Mental Health**

### **Local News**

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The Grays Harbor Task Force on Substance Abuse and Mental Health released its report today, recommending that the County Commissioners adopt a 1/10th of 1% retail sales tax. The amount is equivalent to 1 penny on a \$10 taxable purchase. Task Force Chair Larry Kahl commented, "We understand that 'no new taxes' is a common refrain. No one wants added tax burden in an economic downturn. But we have studied the issues carefully and we believe this measure is affordable and that the benefits to our community far outweigh the costs. "

Based on prior years' revenue collections and considering the experience so far in 2009, the measure would collect between \$750,000 and \$1 million in the first year, dedicated to treating substance abuse and mental illness. One key component of the underlying legislation is to provide the resources needed to start drug courts and other therapeutic court programs, which have shown promise: Thurston County compares its drug court cost of \$16.00 per day to the average jail-day cost of \$73.00. Moreover, the drug court has a repeat offender rate of only 11%, while 72% of non-participants return to jail. "We believe that this investment will reduce the cost and impact of substance abuse. That is something everyone should care about," Kahl said. "A national study shows that it costs the state of Washington \$429 for every resident, every year, to combat the consequences of substance abuse; but we only spend \$14.00 on treatment, research and prevention. Most of the taxpayer's money is spent on a revolving-door system for arrests, courts, jail time, kids in foster care, health costs of addiction, and more. It's just not working." The Task Force also recommends that an ongoing advisory group be formed to carefully manage this new resource, paying close attention to evaluation and effectiveness of programs. Among other services gaps, the report says that priority attention should be given to initiating drug courts, detox services, and programs that can handle the combined effects of substance abuse and mental illness, called co-occurring disorders. Nearly half of all people with a substance abuse problem also experience mental illness, a combination requiring specialized care. The Task Force was created at the request of the County Commissioners. The tax can be enacted by a vote of the Commissioners, and is a provision of a law passed in 2005. It is designed to give local communities the ability to raise and direct local resources to combat the impact of drugs and untreated mental illness. Commissioner Mike Wilson, Chair, commented: "We are very grateful for the time and expertise contributed to this effort by the task force members. We are fortunate to have had such a strong group of community leaders tackle this really tough issue. On behalf of all of the Commissioners, thank you. We will consider these recommendations very carefully."