

Debating The Issues

Forum Panel Fields Questions About Upcoming Election

BY SHAUNA MARLETTE

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If the turnout for Tuesday's forum hosted by the VDCD Legislative Affairs Committee on the upcoming special election set for June 30 is any indication, community members are very interested in the Malt Beverage Tax and the Daycare Ordinance at the center of the debate.

Held in the City Hall Council Chambers, community members offered questions for nearly two hours on the issues helping to clarify the debate in order to help decide which way they want to vote.

The special election issues are:

- Imposing a charge upon malt beverage purchases;
- Creating a requirement for day care businesses to register with the city and provide for certain health and safety requirements.

The first half of the evening focused on the malt beverage tax.

In February, the City Council unanimously approved the second reading of Ordinance 1325 to implement a 5 percent malt beverage markup on the wholesale cost and freight of malt beverages beginning on July 1.

As part of the Nov. 4 general election, Vermillion residents decided passed a \$3.1 million bond issue for Prentis Park improvements. The project carries an estimated \$5.25 million price tag, with the lion's share — an estimated \$4 million — for constructing a new swimming pool with modern features. The new pool will replace the current structure which is nearly 50 years old.

The new amenities include a lazy river, water slides, floatable water walk, basketball hoop, one-meter diving tower, shade structures and zero-depth entry, water features, bench and shade.

The funds raised from the malt beverage tax would go to pay half of the interest and principal on the bond estimated to be approximately \$220,000 per year. The malt beverage tax is estimated to raise \$116,000 per year.

Mat Zeman, owner of Carey's Bar and Jesse Jastram, an employee of Dakota Beverage, spoke against the tax, while City Council member Steve Ward and Director and municipal pool committee member Shane Nordyke spoke in favor of the tax. The Malt Beverage forum was moderated by Craig



Thompson,

Zeman stressed that those opposed to the tax are not against the pool project, but rather a special tax that targets a small portion of the population of the community.

"There have been several community members that have stated to me directly, that we, malt beverage license holders are against this community and the new pool park project," he said. "This couldn't be further from the truth. We are very much for improving our community and this project will do just that. It will be great for Vermillion. Our contention all along is that it should be paid for in a responsible way. To which this responsibility lies with the entire community not just a small portion."

He went on to say that malt beverage users are already taxed at a higher rate than everyone else in town.

"Sales of my establishment have gone down consistently from 4-7 percent in the five years I have been operating," Zeman said. "I can see sharp decreases in sales that directly coincide with the two times I have had to raise prices. The price raises were due to the rise in cost of wholesale, surcharges for deliveries and several other factors that any other business in town can point to on their invoices."

Stating that the only other option malt beverage license holders have, rather than passing the costs on to the consumers, is to pay the tax themselves, and reduce their profit margins, which Zeman said does not seem fair.

He also said he has issue with the city passing a tax, when they have said they have the money to pay for the project without the tax.

"The mayor himself, along with other council people have stated, definitively, that the city can pay for this pool without a new tax," Zeman said. "Construction will not cease, and all plans will go ahead if this tax is repealed. Our community development will go on without this extra taxation on a small minority of people."

However, Ward, in response to a question about the city's ability to pay for the project with the funds on hand stated:

"I think it is important for everyone to think about how \$125,000 could be taken out of our current budget," he said. "This is not a small amount. We fund things like the National Music Museum, WH Over Museum, all precious things that would be on the chopping block if we have to cut into our budget. The only other recourse would be to raise property taxes."

Ward said that Vermillion community members are already paying a higher property tax level than most in the state and he does not feel that is a viable option for this project.

Nordyke added that the community of Vermillion agreed that this was the way to go when they approved the bond in November.

"The idea that the city currently has the money to pay for this project is only if we cut things already being paid for, not sitting in excess — it could equal one or two people's jobs," she said. "Yeah, we have it if we are willing to cut the things we already have."

In response to a comment made during the forum that the pool project has not been delayed and is still on schedule by the June 30 election she said that is simply not true.

"The project has already been delayed and is about a year behind schedule," Nordyke said. "They are waiting to see what happens before moving forward on the project. The pool was scheduled to close at the end of July in order to allow construction to begin. It will now wait until the following spring to begin. Every delay we have is an increase in costs; every delay with contractor adds cost."

Daycare Ordinance Debate

Ordinance 1326 which requires registration of private, in-home, daycares with the city was approved by the City Council vote of 7-2 on April 13.

The ordinance requires a provider to register with the city. In order to obtain city certification the daycare provider will need to demonstrate safety items such as having a fire extinguisher, smoke detector, two ways out of basement space used for a daycare, safe electrical wiring, closets that prevent a child from being locked inside and other basic safety requirements, such as having a fenced in yard.



SHAUNA MARLETTE/FOR THE PLAIN TALK

Matt Zeman and Jesse Jastram, speak against the Malt Beverage tax imposed by the city to help pay for the Prentis Park Pool Project during Tuesday Night's forum regarding the upcoming June 30 special election.

The ordinance allowed that a daycare which registered prior to July 1 would not require an inspection moving the first inspection of the property to 2016.

Moderated by Matt Fairholm, City Council member Parker Erickson and parent Laura Wiemers spoke against the ordinance, while Gera Jacobs, USD Professor and Council member Kathrine Price spoke in favor of the ordinance.

Wiemers said the issues that the ordinance raises are varied and cause undo hardships for in-home daycare providers in Vermillion.

"It is concerning to me, that at the April 6 council meeting, City Council members were asked questions regarding the ordinance and were unable to answer without the assistance of the city manager or the fire chief regarding what the ordinance actually said," she said. "When asked several questions regarding different portions of the ordinance it became clear to the audience that no one what sure what the ordinance actually contained, yet they passed it anyway."

She stressed that if the ordinance stays in place Vermillion could lose a significant portion of their providers and that the costs incurred would be passed on to parents, making affordable daycare unavailable for many.

However Price said that many of the providers who are threatening to close their doors are close to retirement and the ordinance would assure that the next generation of providers meet basic standards.

The panel all agreed that they did not believe there are any unsafe providers currently operating in Vermillion.

Price also said that the registration should be a comfort to parents in that, while they are not experts in fire code safety rules and regulations, the ones inspecting the daycares would be allowing the parents to focus on the provider and if they are a right fit for their family.

"Even after all the discussion, I don't understand how parents

would not want their daycares locatable by fire and rescue crews or to have periodic fire inspections," she said.

However, Weimers questioned, if the ordinance is retained, will Vermillion lose daycares and what will happen if they do. Stating that she believes it will negatively affect the care options in town.

How To Vote

"Absentee voting can be done at the City Hall Finance office Monday-Friday from 8 a.m.-5 p.m.," said city finance officer Mike Carlson. "The sample ballot has been approved and is available here at City Hall and are also available at the website. We have the absentee ballot application on our website, so if you are out of town you can download that, fill it out, have it notarized or send in a copy of a S.D. state identification card and we will send you a ballot. They have to be a registered voter within the city of Vermillion."

"Voting on the 30th will be held at the National Guard Armory," he said. "Voting will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Absentee Voting ends at 5 p.m. on June 29. In encourage everyone to bring a valid form of identification, however if they do not have it they can fill an affidavit out at the voting site."

An affidavit will consist of filling out a piece of paper certifying that you are the person you say you are, even though you do not have your identification with you.

To watch the video of the forum go to <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/64657622>.

For more information about the election go to <http://tinyurl.com/po89cgx>.

For election day results, follow the Plain Talk on Twitter at @plaintalk2 or on Facebook when editor, Shauna Marlette will be live reporting results from the National Guard Armory beginning at 7 p.m. Tuesday, June 30.

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