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Tax up to voters
Council approves measure for city services

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The Salinas Californian

The Salinas City Council received a standing ovation Tuesday after voting unanimously to put a half-cent sales tax increase on the November ballot.

A similar measure was defeated last November, but supporters of the tax, which would be used to restore library, recreation, police and fire services, vowed to bring the new measure to success.

About 200 residents filled the City Hall Rotunda and made emotional statements about the impact city service cuts have had on their lives and families.

Even the Rev. Sylvester Ryan, bishop of the Diocese of Monterey, came out to show support for the tax.

To place the general tax measure on the Nov. 8 ballot, the council had to declare a city emergency; otherwise the measure would have had to wait for the next general election in 2006.

"Each of us is here as an elected official because we love Salinas," Mayor Anna Caballero said, referring to fellow council members.

"We don't want to cut city services anymore and we've reached a stage where this is an emergency.

"Tonight is the first step in a long process. I support a declaration of emergency and pledge my support to get people to go out and vote in November."

March on City Hall

City Manager Dave Mora said if the measure does not pass, the city's three libraries will close on Jan. 1 when private donations raised by the Rally Salinas! campaign run out.

Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action (COPA) and the Center for Community Advocacy were among several organizations that brought people to fill the City Hall Rotunda in support of the sales tax.

"If I have to fear for the lives of my kids every time they go out, I think that's an emergency," Maria Elena Manzo, a member of COPA, said to the City Council.

The organizations led a three-block march from Sacred Heart Catholic Church at Stone and Market streets to City Hall at 200 Lincoln Ave. Demonstrators carried paintings of the Virgin Mary and tall poles with colorful streamers attached.

Speakers brought attention to cuts in police, library, fire and recreation services, amounting to more \$15 million in reductions, since April 2003.

"All of our services are being taken away one by one," said Mary Castillo, a COPA member and parishioner of St. Mary of the Nativity Catholic Church on Second Avenue. "We need these vital city services."

Committee promised

Members of all four of Salinas' Catholic churches were joined by Bishop Ryan, pastors and representatives from the city's Episcopal churches, who urged the crowd to support city services.

"Libraries are the living memory that give this city a sense of its identity," Ryan said.

Also demonstrating in front of City Hall were a handful of residents protesting the proposed sales-tax increase.

Annemarie Tresch said the council should call for a special tax for city services that would require a two-thirds vote for approval. Because the proposed sales tax is a general tax measure, it requires only simple majority approval.

"We want to know where our money goes," Tresch said.

If the city spells out how the money would be spent, the measure automatically becomes a special tax requiring a super-majority for passage. The measure's language states the money would go to general fund services such as police, fire, libraries, recreation and graffiti abatement.

But council members said they would create an independent citizens committee to oversee how money generated from the tax is spent.

The tax would raise between \$8 million and \$12 million for the city's general fund and expire after 10 years. The tax increase would cost residents \$0.50 for every \$100 spent.



SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Members of Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action and the Center for Community Advocacy march to Salinas City Hall on Tuesday to show support for a half-cent sales tax measure to pay for city services.