

Guest View

SHERRY DEVLIN AND STACY RYE: SAY 'NO' TO SPECIAL INTEREST REQUESTS

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SHERRY DEVLIN and STACY RYE

We are deeply concerned about the two local assessments on November's ballot, and their impact on property taxes. We fear that many working-class families and retirees in Missoula are in danger of being priced out of their homes by ever-growing mortgage payments.

Already, Missoula city and county leaders are forecasting a 10-11% increase in property taxes this year, in addition to new assessments from a couple of small school levies and a levy for Aging Services.

If the proposed homeless levy and the fairgrounds/hockey bond on November's ballot pass as well, property taxes will rise significantly. Taxes on a Missoula home valued at \$400,000 will increase between \$400 and \$450 in one year.

That's a lot for any of our families, friends or neighbors to absorb. Most of us don't have that kind of cushion in our budgets, especially with inflation pushing the price of groceries and other necessities off the charts in recent months. Many of us are worried about how we'll pay our mortgage in the year ahead. We've already cut expenses, and cut them again, trying to make ends meet.

Missoula leaders blame our property tax woes on Montana's lack of revenue options for local government. And certainly, the Legislature

does need to allow new sources of revenue. But what seems to be missing locally is the political will — or courage — to prioritize the bonds and levies that appear on nearly every ballot.

In 2022 alone, we have voted or will vote on five different bonds and levies. Two school levies and the Missoula Aging Services levy passed last spring. The fairgrounds/hockey bond and the homeless services levy are on the ballot this November. Other bonds and levies are in discussion for future votes. Missoula, this is unsustainable.

Some of these ballot measures are needed. (Educating our children is a good thing.) Some are not, and some could be reevaluated to cost less. Some could be financed by reducing local government expenditures in other areas. Some could be funded by grants or private fundraising. All should be evaluated for their impact on local residents who want desperately to remain in their homes, but simply cannot afford higher and higher mortgage payments.

Be careful what you vote for on Election Day. Ask local government leaders to be more thoughtful and prioritize what our city and county need, instead of approving every proposed ballot measure that comes before them. Ask that they lead respectful, wide-ranging, public conversations about community priorities and their financing.

Our property taxes can't handle a mind-boggling 10-12% increase every year. Yes, we need to make sure we adequately fund the bread-and-butter services for which we depend on local government. But we must start saying “no” to some of these special-interest requests if we want to ensure that our families and friends can afford to continue living in their homes. In Missoula.

Sherry Devlin is a former reporter and editor at the Missoulian, now retired. Stacy Rye has worked in countless non-profits, served as a City Council member and County Commissioner, and now works in real estate.