

Des Moines voters should support the local-option sales tax on March 5

Editorial: With so many tax-exempt properties, Des Moines has the highest property tax rate in the metro. A sales tax increase would help provide equitable funding for basic services.

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Do you live in Des Moines and think your property taxes are too high? Then you should vote to approve [Public Measure A](#) for a 1-cent local-option sales tax. The referendum is March 5.

Do you believe everyone who expects police protection, working sewers and plowed roads should contribute toward the cost? Then vote yes and encourage your neighbors to do the same.

Public Measure A increases sales tax in the city by 1 percent. The local tax — already in place in 97 percent of Iowa communities — will generate an estimated \$37 million annually for the capital city.

Half that money will be used for property tax relief, which is desperately needed.



City workers load destroyed belongings from flood-damaged homes on East 35th Street in Des Moines on Tuesday, July 3, 2018.

Zach Boyden-Holmes/The Register

Des Moines has many tax-exempt properties, including state government buildings, hospitals and churches. That leaves homeowners to bear the burden of paying higher taxes to fund city services — the highest in the metro area. If the tax measure is approved, an average home in Des Moines valued at \$150,000 would save \$158 in property taxes.

But even residents who do not own property should vote "yes." The other half of money generated will be used for endeavors that [shore up and improve quality of life](#) in the city.

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According to [a resolution](#) approved by city leaders, these endeavors include: accelerating street improvements and storm water improvements to reduce the impact of flooding; removing and redeveloping blighted properties in neighborhoods; expanding hours of operation for libraries; funding 13 firefighter positions for which federal funding expired last year; and providing additional support for mobile mental health crisis teams.

“A vote for Measure ‘A’ will be a vote for Des Moines firefighters and police. It will help us fund critical investments in public safety, while improving response times,” said Joe Van Haalen, president of Des Moines Firefighters IAFF Local 4. “It will also go toward a much-needed, new fire station that will serve northeast Des Moines.”



The Des Moines Fire Department battles a house fire on 36th Street in Des Moines on Wednesday, Jan. 30, 2019.

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The sales tax increase would not apply to groceries, prescriptions, medical devices, energy bills, gasoline or vehicle purchases. Spending will be reviewed annually and subject to regular public audit and expenditure reporting.

Perhaps most important, passage of the measure will ensure visitors, vacationers and commuters contribute toward the cost of basic city operations. Every year, thousands of people come to Des Moines for shopping, concerts, festivals, sporting events and activities like the Iowa State Fair. Capturing one more cent on the dollar from them will help fund the cost of the roads, bridges and sewers they use while here. It is estimated over one-third of the revenue generated will come from out-of-town visitors.

When someone from Beaverdale visits Jordan Creek Mall in Dallas County, they pay an additional penny to support that local government. Why shouldn't shoppers coming to Des Moines do the same?

The measure will help the city diversify its sources of revenue. It will help ensure internet sales taxes are captured for local services. It is supported by a long list of organizations and individuals, including AARP Iowa, AMOS, Des Moines Police Officers Association, Taxpayers Association of Central Iowa and numerous neighborhood associations.

Actually, it's difficult to understand why anyone would oppose the measure. Those who resist the notion of any tax increase will simply be voting to raise their property taxes if the sales tax vote fails, city officials say. Those who say they don't like or trust government still expect someone to respond when they call 911. And passage is not a sure thing, considering [46 percent](#) of the mere 12,500 Des Moines voters who turned out rejected essentially the same measure in March 2018.

(It did not go into effect because of "no" votes from some suburbs. A change in the law since then would allow it to take effect upon passage by Des Moines voters.)

Des Moines will somehow find the money it needs to fund basic services. Without a sales tax increase, more and more of that money will come from increasing property taxes. Voting "yes" on March 5 will ensure everyone, not only homeowners, contributes toward the cost of operating Iowa's largest city.

Voting information

Registered voters in Des Moines can head to the polls on March 5. It takes only a few minutes to mark the "yes" box on the ballot. People can also vote absentee or early until March 4 at the Polk County Election Office, 102 2nd Ave.

Other cities voting, too

The cities of Alleman, Altoona, Pleasant Hill, West Des Moines and Windsor Heights as well as Des Moines are voting on 1 percent local-option sales tax measures March 5.

West Des Moines already collects the tax in the Dallas County portion of the city. This vote is whether to impose the tax on the Polk County portion.

Much of the same logic for passage applies to all cities: Diversify sources of tax revenue and ensure visitors and tax-exempt properties help pay for city services. By state law, half the revenue in each city would go toward property tax relief. Each city has adopted a resolution detailing how the other half of the revenue would be spent.

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