

A property-tax hike that could save you money?

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Salt Lake County homeowners may find a little love for Utah's most hated tax.

Why? Because the dreaded property tax may allow them to dump that darned police fee while saving them money in the long run.

But larger property owners, such as Kennecott Utah Copper, may find themselves coughing up more cash than they did under the unpopular fee.

County Council Chairman Max Burdick announced Monday before the Utah Taxpayers Association that the average homeowner in the unincorporated area likely would see a \$48 drop in their overall bill for policing if the county changes the way it pays for law enforcement in suburbs such as Magna, Millcreek and Kearns.

Rather than paying \$266 a year through a combined police fee (\$162) and property tax (\$104), the owner of a \$220,000 home would pay a \$218 property tax for law enforcement. Residents then could deduct that amount from their state and federal taxes, saving them about \$25 more.

Kennecott, on the other hand, would shell out considerably more for law enforcement. Its police fee was \$1.2 million a year. A property tax for the same purpose would run the copper giant about \$3.9 million, according to county estimates.

Why? Because a property tax is based on property value. The police fee is based on how much demand certain types of users — such as homeowners, businesses and churches — place on law enforcement.

“There are always going to be pluses and minuses to all that we do,” Burdick said.

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The county, under a decree from the Legislature, must eliminate its police fee no later than Dec. 31, 2012. And if the county wants to replace its \$11.7 million in police-related revenues, it will have to turn to property taxes to do it.

The county could cut services instead. But officials warn that government slashed deeply into its budget for unincorporated areas when the police fee was

imposed, reducing its law-enforcement ledger by 7 percent and its public works account by a fourth.

“We have already made fairly drastic cuts,” Burdick told the business-backed taxpayers association. “There really aren't a lot of options left, except for raising property taxes.”

County officials will pose the question during a series of public forums in June to find out what solution is most palatable to the unincorporated populace of nearly 170,000 people.

Kennecott spokeswoman Jana Kettering said the mine favors a property tax over a police fee — even if it means a higher law-enforcement tab.

“We are fully aware that we may pay more under this new system where property taxes are assessed,” Kettering said. “We are supportive of the new system, as it is a more open and transparent public process where we will have the opportunity to comment on the taxes along the way.”

Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper and president of the taxpayers association, pledged Monday to work with the county to fill its financial gap. He did not reject the idea of replacing the police fee with a property tax.

“It is going to be a tax increase,” he said. “We all have to admit that. It is a tax shift from one to another. The question is: Is it the legitimate amount that the county deserves to do the job?”

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Meetings Set

Salt Lake County will stage a series of public meetings in June to discuss how to pay for law enforcement in unincorporated suburbs such as Magna, Millcreek and Kearns once its police fee is gone. Here's the schedule:

Kearns » 6-8 p.m., June 7, Kearns Library, 5350 S. 4220 West

Southeast Islands » 7-9 p.m., June 8, Peruvian Park Elementary, 1545 E. 8425 South, Sandy

Big Cottonwood Canyon » 7-9 p.m., June 13, Whitmore Library, 2197 E. Fort Union Blvd. (7000 South), Cottonwood Heights

Emigration Canyon » 7-9 p.m., June 14, Emigration Fire Station, 5025 E. Emigration Canyon Road

Copperton » 6:30-8:30 p.m., June 15, Bingham Canyon Lions Club, 320 Hillcrest St.

Magna » 7-9 p.m., June 16, Webster Community Center, 8925 W. 2700 South

General unincorporated » 7-9 p.m., June 21, County Government Center, 2001 S. State St., Salt Lake City

Millcreek » 7-9 p.m., June 29, Salt Lake Christian Center, 4300 S. 700 East

Source: Salt Lake County