

A local option

Writers of letters to the editor of this newspaper have argued both sides of the local-option tax issue which will be before Story County voters on the general election ballot. The tax is supposed to give property tax relief and support human service agencies and the arts.

Those against the one-cent sales tax have assumed — and rightly so, based on history — that another tax won't really lessen the property tax burden. They figure it will just be another deep pocket into which big-spending government can dig.

Most of the time if you allow a government body — such as Congress or the Iowa Legislature — money, it will be spent. Congress and the Iowa Legislature have been spending more than they're allowed. In an effort to bring their budgets in line, duly elected state and national leaders have tried to cut their aid to municipalities while still mandating that local government provide the same level of services.

But the only way local government currently can raise more revenue to provide those services is through property taxes. No one wants to raise property taxes. Consensus seems clear on that. So the money must come from somewhere, or some very important services will have to be eliminated.

Now comes the local option tax. It's designed to relieve the property tax burden and provide for human services and arts funding. Too good to be true, many of our friends say. Just another way to increase taxes, right?

Wrong. Each government body in Story County, so apt to spend as much as given, has had to make a commitment — on paper, published and binding — that it will do such and such with a local option tax. As it is, local government is committed to devoting 60 percent of the local option tax to property tax relief. That's more than \$1 million per year. The rest of the money, some \$600,000, will go to replacing funds lost to human service agencies by the elimination of federal revenue sharing funds.

Property taxes are regressive. They are not based on ability to pay.

A sales tax is not especially attractive but it does have some strong features. People who don't pay property taxes (out-of-towners, for example) but who enjoy all the services of Ames, such as the Octagon Art Center or the beautiful new library, can help pay for them when they do business here. (It is important to note that the option tax is much like the Iowa sales tax: Neither would apply to necessities such as food or gasoline or heating oil, etc.)

Those services are important, especially in harder times. We need centers to help battered women and troubled youth. We need to support the arts in a region that prides itself on culture. They help our economy by drawing people to our stores. We cannot coolly watch those important facets of life in this Lincolnland region just dribble away. And we must, as skeptical letter writers point out, provide tax relief to property owners who have watched their bills go up with every promise of official restraint.

Here's one tax that government bodies must live up to; it's built in. Property taxes must be reduced by design.

It is possibly the most important issue on the loaded ballot Nov. 4. We think it has merit, and urge voters to approve the local-option tax.