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City Council candidate calls tax increase an option

Revenue issues need addressed, he says

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A candidate for the Columbus City Council says it might be time to raise taxes.

Republican Paul Bingle, who's seeking one of four four-year council terms, is bringing up a topic some consider taboo in politics. He says city budget trends -- rising expenses, flat revenue -- make tax talk inevitable, even if candidates don't want to discuss it before the Nov. 6 elections.



Republican Paul Bingle says a tax hike should be considered to pay for services residents say they need.

"The city is in trouble," said Bingle, criticizing incumbent Democrats and even fellow Republicans who he said make promises without discussing prices.

"We all know this crunch is upon us. ... I'd really rather be honest even if I lose."

Bingle isn't calling directly for an increase in the city's 2 percent income tax. He wants to put together a panel of experts to study the books, estimate the cost of restoring services cut from past budgets and recommend whether a tax increase is needed.

But he's coming closer than anyone else in a campaign in which the other candidates are calling for more police, more parks, more sidewalks and more city services.

"People feel the need for more. We've got to be honest and say, 'Here's the price tag, folks,' " Bingle said.

Columbus residents must approve any income-tax increase through a citywide vote. They haven't been asked since 1982, when they approved raising the rate from 1.5 percent.

City Auditor Hugh J. Dorrian raised the idea of a higher tax in early 2006. He said last week that he still thinks Columbus needs to look at new sources of revenue, which could include higher taxes.

Council President Michael C. Mentel, a Democrat who's up for re-election, issued a statement calling any discussion of an income-tax increase "premature and, frankly, irresponsible."

People who attended a debate this month in Clintonville thought Councilman Andrew Ginther was raising the issue when, talking about the negative effect of city cuts, he said, "We're going to have to have a conversation about revenue."

The Democrat said later, though, that the revenue he was referring to comes from the federal and state governments. He said he wants to get more for Columbus.

"Oh lord, no," he said when asked whether he was talking about local taxes. "Until someone tells me otherwise, it's not even on my radar screen."

Mayor Michael B. Coleman said his 2008 budget proposal won't include any recommendation to seek a tax increase.

"I've lived through the toughest times the city has ever had financially," said the Democrat, who's seeking a third term. "We went through (the budget) with a scalpel and an ax. ... I still believe in the scalpel and the ax."

Republican William M. Todd, Coleman's challenger, ruled out a tax increase. Other council candidates either dismissed the idea or didn't return calls seeking comment.

Coleman said he is concerned about how the rising number of home foreclosures will affect the economy. And 10 months ago, he presented a financial overview with this year's budget that warned that spending needs are rising faster than tax collections.

Income taxes from residents and people who work in Columbus account for almost two-thirds of the city budget's general fund, which pays for most services.

Until 2002, tax collections grew for more than 40 years because of bigger incomes and a rising population. They began climbing again at smaller rates in 2003, and the city tapped into its rainy-day fund to balance budgets.

A higher-than-expected jump in tax revenue last year meant no layoffs, program cuts or spending from the city's savings account. Talk of a tax increase stopped, too.

Dorrian said city tax collections are on track to increase another 4.5 percent this year.

Bingle said expenses that have been put off, such as replacing police and fire equipment, now are piling up. He said voters also are telling him they want recreation programs and other services restored.

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