

Trash tax?

Written by CJ Baker
Thursday, 09 July 2009



A city of Powell dump truck unloads garbage at the Powell landfill Wednesday morning. Governments in Park County are putting together a committee to study funding alternatives for the county's landfills. Tribune photo by Carla Wensky

Cities, county forming committee to study options

Your garbage rates are going up. How would you like to pay for them?

That's what city and county officials want to find out in coming months.

On Tuesday, representatives from Powell, Cody and Park County agreed to form a seven-member committee to look at how to pay for increased expenses at the county's landfills.

The primary option discussed at the Cody meeting was to ask voters to pass a new, 1-cent capital facilities tax in 2010.

A \$13.2-million capital facilities tax was passed in 2006 (to fund the new Powell pool, the new Cody library, and the renovated Meeteetse pool) and it is scheduled to finish up in September.

A capital facilities tax is set for a specific sum, rather than running perpetually; a rough number thrown around at Tuesday's meeting was \$15 million.

The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality is requiring the Cody landfill pit to be lined to keep garbage contaminants from getting into groundwater. The county determined it was too expensive to line Powell, Meeteetse or Clark's landfill sites, and plans to close them, but Cody's site isn't cheap either.

New monitoring wells, closure costs, new equipment and excavation costs all have driven up the cost of landfill tipping fees, which, effective Oct. 1, are going up from \$60 per ton to \$90 per ton.

Ultimately, costs are expected to rise to \$114 per ton, but city and county officials believe that by paying for the needed changes with a capital facilities tax instead, rates could return to \$60 or better.

Additionally, Cody city administrator Andy Whiteman said, with the tax, 26 percent of the money would be provided by tourists. Increasing tipping fees, he said, creates a heavy burden on commercial business. To meet the October increase, businesses will start paying an additional \$22 per month in Cody. Depending on the business, Powell's commercial rates went up \$9 to \$26, effective this month.

The cities and county appeared to be in agreement that a new capital facilities tax should go before voters in 2010.

"I think it's reasonable to put it out there and say, 'Voters, what do you think?'" said Cody City Council President Sam Krone. "I think it gives folks in the county more discretion in how they're taxed."

For Powell, a capital facilities tax would provide funding for equipment that otherwise would not be funded by county tipping fees — such as new trucks and a transfer station.

The county has been reluctant to commit to building a transfer station. Numbers crunched by an outside consultant found that putting up a transfer station in Powell would raise tipping fees another \$30, as opposed to the city directly trucking its waste to Cody.

However, city of Powell officials believe that direct hauling would damage its current fleet of trucks, and that many loads would be only partially full.

City councilman Josh Shorb said Powell would like to see a transfer station built at the current landfill site, which would serve as a hub for all garbage on this eastern end of the county — including rural residents and private haulers.

"We think that's the best solution for Powell," Shorb said.

Shorb noted that, while the transition will have little impact on the city of Cody's day-to-day operations, Powell will have to make serious changes, as it's losing its landfill — likely next year. Parts of the landfill, such as those that contain construction and demolition materials, grass clippings, and dead animals are scheduled to remain open after the closure to household waste.

The committee — which will consist of two representatives from the county, two from Powell, two from Cody and one from Meeteetse — will look at what things would be funded with a capital facilities tax, or if another funding option — such as a solid waste mill levy — would be more appropriate.

"I'm glad we're sitting here," said Shorb, calling the financing the "600-pound gorilla in the room."

The 6,000-ton gorilla — the possibility of Powell taking its 12,000 pounds of annual garbage to Cowley rather than Cody — appears to have left the room. Powell officials had been looking at heading to Big Horn County, as the Cowley site is 14 miles closer, and is not being required to install a liner. That likely would have meant lower costs for Powell, but on Wednesday, Powell Mayor Scott Mangold said Cowley is "basically not an option." That site is small, and is slated to close in five years. With Powell's waste, that number would dip to two and a half years, at which point Powell would be back where it started.

Shorb wanted to make sure that a capital facilities tax for garbage wouldn't be competing with more exciting projects. There had been talk of possibly renewing the tax to pay for a convention center in Cody and as an option for funding Centennial Park on Powell's west end.

However, Krone described the center proposal as "pretty dead right now," and Mangold said Centennial Park is looking at funding through grants and private foundations.

"We're not really looking at a cap tax right now to pay for that," Mangold said.

A capital facilities tax for the landfill also could help pay for regional recycling operations.

Officials in Powell have discussed the possibility of housing a county-wide recycling center in Powell, so garbage trucks returning from Cody could bring recyclables with them.

The current county road and bridge shop in Powell, slated to be replaced in the next couple years, could house the center, Shorb said.

Commissioner Bucky Hall suggested that the cities take measures to encourage diversion from the landfill. One option he proposed was passing a 20-cent tax on all plastic bags to discourage their use and raise money for recycling. Hall noted that the bags often blow out of the Cody landfill and litter the area, including near Hall's Caleco Foundry.

Because of economies of scale, a decrease in garbage taken to the landfill will increase rates.

"It won't be that profitable for the landfill, but it will extend the life and make us a green county," said Hall. "You may have to force-feed it to the public for a while, but ultimately, I think it would be a good thing."

Whiteman said grocery stores have actively opposed similar taxes elsewhere.

"I'm sure you'd be going to war," Hall said, though Commissioner Dave Burke added, "I don't really see a downside for the retailers."

"I think it's great food for thought," said Cody Mayor Nancy Tia Brown, but she said the plastic bags weren't a direct solution to landfill issues.