

For Austin homeowners, every tax hike comes from the same wallet



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It's striking how quickly the costs are piling up for the typical Austin homeowner.

A \$200 property tax hike from the city, if voters approve it next month, on top of a roughly \$100 increase already baked into Austin's tax rate.

Another \$129 increase in Travis County taxes, plus a one-time charge of \$71 to pay for responding to this summer's flooding disaster. Plus the additional \$64 in rising taxes for Central Health, Travis County's hospital district.

All of that comes on top of the worthy but sizable property tax hikes that voters approved a year ago — a \$412 increase in Austin school district taxes to stave off the worst budget cuts and fund teacher raises, and the \$100 bump in Travis County taxes for much-needed child care services.

I'm all for investing in the services that make our community livable and vibrant — that strengthen our schools, fund essential public safety and disaster response, and maintain the treasures like our parks and libraries. But our household budgets are feeling the strain of inflation, too. And taxpayer fa-

tigue is real.

With several entities all turning to the same taxpayers for more dollars, it's fair to ask: Why aren't they talking to each other about their cumulative impact on taxpayers and how they can ease it?

A decade ago there was an effort to do this very thing. The Regional Affordability Committee, created in 2015, had elected officials from Austin, Travis and Williamson counties, Capital Metro, Central Health, Austin Community College and several school districts, all gathering to discuss ways to collaborate on cost-saving efforts and avoid hitting taxpayers with too many increases at once.

I last wrote about the effort in 2023, after the committee had gone dormant for two years, derailed by the pandemic and turnover of key members.

The group hasn't roared back to life since. To the contrary, Austin officials, who'd been talking for months about the likelihood of putting a tax hike before voters in November, were caught off guard this fall when Travis County commissioners maxed out their tax rate under a provision in state law allowing higher taxes without voter approval after a natural disaster.

"This building was kind of all going, 'Whoa. I didn't know about that,'" Mayor Kirk Watson told me from City Hall last week. "And so I would say people were generally surprised."

In fairness, no one invited the Fourth of July weekend floods.



Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman

Rooftops sprout in Easton Park, a master-planned community in Southeast Austin. The line items on homeowners' bills come from different taxing agencies, but they all hit the same wallets.

Travis County had the responsibility to deploy emergency responders, road and bridge repair crews and essential aid for people who lost their homes.

But in my view, county officials should have limited the size of that tax hike to cover the actual costs of the disaster. Instead, the county expects the one-time disaster tax hike to raise \$42 million, twice as much as Travis County has spent so far responding to the floods. County officials, anxious about the possibility of unanticipated costs and unreliable reimbursements from the feds, erred on the side of over-collection and vowed to put any extra dollars toward other emergency preparedness projects.

"I think, historically, we have

had a good dialogue about these (tax increase) elections," Travis County Judge Andy Brown told me. "And I think this year, just based on the timing of the disaster (in the budget cycle), we really didn't have any options. I mean, there was not an option to *not* do this."

At the same time, numerous officials I spoke with agreed there's a necessity for better conversations on cost-saving efforts and minimizing taxpayers' burdens. In May, the Austin City Council directed the city manager to start working with other local governments "to identify opportunities to coordinate services, find efficiencies, or otherwise collaborate" to improve programs and lower taxes

for Austin taxpayers.

"The way I look at it, win or lose on the (Austin tax rate election), we're going to have to figure out how we have greater intergovernmental collaboration," Watson said. Key to this effort, he said, will be getting the staff-level experts — not the elected officials — leading the brainstorming and exploration of possible cost-saving ideas.

Brown said he welcomed the effort. And he argued it should be "a true conversation of everyone who is taxing the people here in Travis County," meaning the state government, which collects billions in sales taxes and siphons off massive recapture payments from Austin schools' taxpayers, should be at the table, too.

Which is valid. Although I imagine state lawmakers, who have chronically under-funded vital services, would be all too happy to point out the various tax breaks they've placed among the constitutional amendments on the November ballot.

At any rate, for the average Austin household, it doesn't matter whether the extra dollars go to City Hall, the county jail or the hospital district. It all comes from the same wallet. If local governments keep asking more of taxpayers, they owe us more in return: coordination, transparency and an honest conversation about the cumulative impact of their decisions.

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