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Fall votes likely on optional tax hikes

Many could raise hotel, meal bills

By Calvin Hennick and Matt Rocheleau
Globe Correspondents / September 3, 2009

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Only a handful of cities and towns in the area adopted new local-option taxes on hotel rooms and restaurant meals in time to implement them on Oct. 1, but a second wave of communities will be considering the issue this fall.

“We anticipate that in the next several months a very large number of communities will actively look at and adopt the local-option taxes,” said Geoffrey Beckwith, executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association.

Selectmen in Boxborough and Framingham have placed both taxes on their fall Town Meeting warrants, and the step is being discussed in Arlington, Belmont, Bolton, Hudson, Lexington, Littleton, Millis, Needham, Shrewsbury, Wellesley, and Wrentham, according to local officials. Five local communities have adopted one or both of them.

“I suspect strongly that many more will be taking it up this fall, and then again in the spring,” said Paul Blazar, Hudson’s executive assistant.

Blazar said he put a proposal to enact the taxes on a draft warrant for Town Meeting in November, but the Board of Selectmen hadn’t discussed the issue yet. A limitation of the town meeting form of government has kept a number of communities from seriously considering the issue, he said.

“Most towns don’t have TM’s during the summer,” Blazar said. “It’s hard to get quorums.”

In Millis, selectmen will hold an informational session to discuss putting them on the November warrant.

Town Administrator Charles Aspinwall said the Millis board hadn’t discussed the proposal in depth, but noted the approximately \$46,000 the town could net annually would be helpful.

“We have \$282,000 of one-time money built into our budget” for the 2010 fiscal year, which started July 1, Aspinwall said. “We have to make up that \$282,000 somehow in fiscal 2011. This could fill part of that revenue loss.”

Wrentham Town Administrator Jack McFeeley said he expects selectmen to put the taxes on November’s warrant as well.

He said he will make a pitch to Town Meeting voters supporting the taxes by comparing the revenue - about \$70,000 - with a police officer’s salary.

“A police officer with benefits is about that number for the base salary, and we do need two police officers right now,” he said. “This is one of the few, albeit small, options that the state has made available to us, and we’re going to have to take advantage of it.”

The Legislature this spring passed a law allowing cities and towns to impose

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The Legislature this spring passed a law allowing cities and towns to impose a .75 percent tax on restaurant meals and increase the hotel occupancy tax from 4 percent to 6 percent.

Less than 10 percent of the state's 351 cities and towns approved the local taxes by Monday's deadline for levying them on Oct. 1. Among local communities, Bedford, Brookline, Franklin, and Plainville adopted both sets of taxes, while Newton approved the increased hotel tax.

According to state Department of Revenue estimates, Brookline will net more than \$740,000 from the new taxes before the fiscal year ends June 30; Bedford will bring in about \$228,000; Franklin, \$348,000; and Plainville, \$77,000. Newton expects to net about \$164,000 from the higher room tax.

The local taxes must be adopted 30 days before the beginning of a fiscal quarter for a community to begin collecting them in the new reporting period. As a result, Aug. 31 was the deadline to start collecting the taxes on Oct. 1, and Dec. 1 is the next deadline for communities that want to implement them as of Jan. 1.

Ted Welte, president and chief executive officer of the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce, said some communities may have a short-term competitive advantage in not charging the meals tax, which amounts to 75 cents on a \$100 restaurant tab. But, he said, eventually most cities and towns will adopt both sets of taxes.

"I think towns are going to be facing more layoffs and other service cuts, and given that, I think they will go toward this local-option restaurant and hotel taxes," he said.

"Then, I think, you'll see a level playing field, and people will have to go to Rhode Island and New Hampshire to save 75 cents." ■

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