

EDITORIAL

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300 Oceangate Long Beach, CA 90844 (562) 435-1161
www.presselegram.com
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An irresistible tax

Who can say no to a measure that brings in \$4 million without ruffling taxpayers?

Long Beach City Council members will decide Tuesday whether to impose a tax that would pump \$4 million a year into improving public safety and filling potholes. Who could object?

In this case, almost nobody. The tax would have no discernible effect on taxpayers, and would be fair to oil producers as well: 40 cents a barrel, which is higher than some but lower than others. (Signal Hill charges 60 cents a barrel, but production costs are lower than in Long Beach's trickier tidelands.)

Putting this tax before voters creates some bonus opportunities. If it goes on the ballot next May, for example, it could be expensive because it means expanding the special election, which was limited to the 6th District to fill a City Council vacancy.

But it's an easy call, because the oil tax revenues would start flowing immediately. Also, if that means the election is going to be citywide, the proposed charter changes can go on the same ballot at very little extra cost.

That, by the way, would eliminate our reason for being grumpy in an editorial the other day about rushing charter changes to the polls at great expense. It also would create an opportunity to switch the big-box measure from the 2008 ballot, where it would have added substantial expense to election costs, to the 2007 ballot, where it

could cost as little as \$10,000. (This measure would wipe out the council's new, and pointlessly dumb, prohibition of big-box stores that sell groceries.)

Speaking of grumpy, what if voters reject the oil tax on general principles? This could happen, since putting the measure on a special-election ballot means it needs two-thirds approval, rather than a mere majority if it's on the general-election ballot in 2008.

Simple: Just put it on the ballot a second time and watch it sail through — a majority of voters are easy to please when it isn't costing them anything.

There's still another bonus. Because half of the oil tax revenues would be dedicated to public safety, it may provoke some politically incorrect questions from the 3rd District councilman, Gary DeLong. He has been wondering aloud whether the city should add more police when crime in Long Beach has been dropping and there are so many other unmet needs, including many millions of dollars in repairs of streets and sidewalks.

That's a fair question. As new apartments and condos replace decrepit housing in Long Beach, demographics change and crime declines further. There are more such changes in Long Beach's immediate future.

Also, and this is harder: what are the best ways to control gangs? For sure adding police helps. But as Police Chief Anthony Batts keeps reminding us, police need the imagination and resources of the entire community to really make a difference. That, too, takes money.

The oil tax is a gusher of opportunity.