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SALES TAXES

Law will mean higher energy bills for some

The slight increase for residential users will take effect July 1 in cities that adopt it.

By AMAN BATHEJA abatheja@star-telegram.com

A new state law may lead to a small hike in utility bills for many North Texans.

More than 20 cities will have the option to assess an additional sales tax on home gas and electric bills starting July 1 via their crime control and fire control districts.

North Richland Hills, Euless, Haltom City and Watauga are among those planning to levy the tax. Other cities are thinking about it.

"I know some folks may have some heartburn over us doing this," Haltom City Finance Director Joel Welch said. "The one thing that is certain about this is this money is going to be used for community police work."

The law affects Tarrant County more than any other part of Texas. Of the 32 districts eligible to assess the tax, all but nine are at least partly in Tarrant County, according to the state comptroller.

In Fort Worth on Tuesday, a committee plans to look at whether to assess the fee in the city's crime control district. Keller and Southlake are also weighing whether to pursue the measure.

Many Tarrant County cities have adopted the districts over the last 15 years to support police and fire services with a small increase in the sales tax.

A quirk in the state tax code blocked the districts from assessing the sales tax on gas and electric bills even if the city charged local sales tax on those bills.

State Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, proposed a fix last year after being approached by Flower Mound officials. During a Senate committee hearing on her measure, she said that voters agreed to apply the sales tax to their home gas and electric bills when they voted to create their city's district.

The bill was one of hundreds that died in the House as Democrats stalled to prevent passage of a Republican-supported voter ID bill.

In the last days of the session, language from Nelson's bill was added as an amendment to a bill by Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth.

Perry weighs in

Gov. Rick Perry let the bill become law without his signature in June but issued a statement expressing reservations.

"I have serious concerns about Senate Bill No. 575, which will, without voter approval, increase taxes on Texans living in dozens of fire and crime control districts throughout the state," Perry said.

Dick Lavine, a senior fiscal analyst with the Austin-based Center for Public Policy Priorities, a think tank focused on issues affecting low-income Texans, opposed the measure during the legislative session. He said that sales taxes are regressive and that increasing the cost of a utility was an especially bad idea.

"This is increasing the tax on a necessity of life," Lavine said.

The Texas Municipal League, which lobbies lawmakers on behalf of cities, backed the measure, but it was not a priority, Executive Director Frank Sturzl said.

"There's not a lot of crime control districts around the state," Sturzl said. "They tend to exist up in the Metroplex."

Fort Worth became the first city to approve a sales tax to fund crime control measures in 1995 after the Legislature authorized such elections. Voters agreed to the extra tax with 59 percent support.

The concept spread.

Voters in several Northeast Tarrant County cities approved districts. Arlington voters rejected an eighth-cent sales tax to fund crime services in 2007.

Crime control districts have also been created in Corpus Christi and south Houston, but Tarrant County has the highest concentration of them, according to state records.

Small increase

For most residents, the increase in their energy bills should be small.

The sales tax rates for the districts eligible under the new law range from an eighth-cent to a half-cent, according to the comptroller's office. That would translate to at most a 50-cent tax for every \$100 of a bill.

Welch estimated that Haltom City could collect up to \$42,000 a year in additional revenue for its crime control district.

Cities planning to assess the tax say it will aid police or fire services.

North Richland Hills' crime control district has allowed the city to hire more police officers and fund crime prevention programs without raising the property tax rate, city spokeswoman Mary Peters said. The city will assess its district's half-cent sales tax on energy bills starting July 1.

"This will let us apply the same sales tax rate across the board, which will make our budgeting and accounting processes for sales tax collections easier," Peters wrote in an e-mail.

Watauga Finance Director Scott Neils also cited simplification as part of the reason the city plans to assess the tax.

"The crime control district was specifically excluded, so we're just trying to make it equal for all of the city's sales taxes," Neils said.

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Police release images of Euless bank robbery suspect

Posted Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2010



ramirez@star-telegram.com

EULESS -- Police asked for help Wednesday to identify a man accused of robbing a bank Tuesday afternoon of an undisclosed amount of money.

Authorities released photographs of the man taken by bank surveillance cameras at the Chase Bank, 1060 N. Main St.

The man walked into the bank about 1:35 p.m. Tuesday, handed a note to a teller that demanded money, police said.

The man told the teller that he had a gun, but no weapon was seen, police said.

After taking the money from the teller, the robber fled on foot, police said.

Anyone with information on the case should call Euless police at 817-685-1531 or contact the FBI.

DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR., 817-390-7763

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The Fire Is So Delightful

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 13, 2010 10:34 AM CST

Jeez, everybody gets so freaked out about the "**wind chill factor**." That's all Chow, Baby heard last week: "Ooh, it's only 14 degrees outside - *with the wind chill factor*." "It's going to get down to 6 degrees tonight - *with the wind chill factor*." Where is this brutal wind you can't get away from? Are you up on one of **Fort Worth's mountaintops**, with gales whipping all around you? No, you're on a 10-second stroll from house to driveway, where the wind-shielded ambient temperature is a balmy high 20s. Pretend you live in Paris and throw on a chic scarf. Chow, Baby, meanwhile, is pretending that no one actually has to work outside in this weather, or wait at a bus stop, or will ever have car trouble on a semi-frozen road.

In fact, Chow, Baby, who works indoors except when patronizing taco trucks or patio seating, spent most of Freeze Week snuggled in its house, which the beloved, a native Northerner whom Chow, Baby adores anyway, insisted on **sealing with plastic** so the dreaded wind chill couldn't get us. (None too aesthetic, but it actually did make a big comfort-difference.) And when hunger did force Chow, Baby and its chic scarf to brave that 10-second exposure to high-20s temperature, it found itself drawn like a moth to places with "**heat**" in their very names.

Salsa Fuego (3520 Alta Mere Dr.) opened about four months ago in a former KFC, more proof of Chow, Baby's theory that **fabulous indies** can flourish amid plastic, floor-anchored chairs. (In between, a purple-explosion Charley's Hamburgers operated for a few years.) Warm and friendly owner/cook/busboy **Carlos** grew up in El Paso, and you can see his multi-border influences in, for just one example, the **New Mexico red chile sauce** on your-choice-of-filling **enchiladas** (\$4.99-7.99). Carlos whips up all his sauces to order; for that matter, everything on the menu is either made to order or has been **simmering for hours**. So you'll wait a minute or two for a side of **guacamole** (\$1.89) or creamy **zucchini-corn casserole** (\$1.99), but not for the astoundingly juicy and tender **shredded brisket** and spiced-up **carnitas**, all ready for their taco, torta, or burrito treatment (\$4.99-5.99). Oddly, not much here is super-fuego; even Carlos' **honey chipotle shrimp tacos** (\$2.89 each) are mellowed with mango sauce. Scoffing at the alleged outside temperature, Chow, Baby washed down every delicious bite with chilled **melon agua fresca** (\$2.49).

On the other side of Cowtown, on Highway 10 in Euless, sits a small building outlined with red and white flickering lights that, from a distance, look like a big flame. It is, indeed, **The Flame Steakhouse** (3755 W. Euless Blvd.), and has been since 1964; Chow, Baby's first thought upon entering was, "This makes **Arlington Steak House** look upscale." It happened to be **poker night** (well, at least we missed karaoke night), and the accompanying chain-beer-drinking and chain-smoking action gave the small room quite the **decrepit-neighborhood-bar** feel. Dive-loving Chow, Baby thought it was wonderful, and in fact it only got better.

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PAGE 2 OF 2

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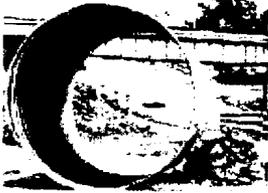
Ordering the top-priced "**Flame Strip Steak**" (10oz, \$16.95) seemed like a **very bad idea** in a place like this, but what the hell. And what a nice surprise it was. Not what you'd call a prime piece of beef, but the meat had been given a red wine/garlic/black pepper bath and had been perfectly medium-rared on a flavor-infusing grill. The beloved's **chili cheeseburger** (\$5.95), too, featured juicy, fresh-tasting meat plus fresh toppings. Our sides may have come straight from a can, but **John's** attentive service was not generic. What a warm, friendly place, a wonderful haven on a freezing - or any - night.

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Some Tarrant transportation bond projects delayed by down economy

Posted Sunday, Jan. 17, 2010



BY ANTHONY SPANGLER aspangler@star-telegram.com

FORT WORTH — Tight city budgets and revenue shortfalls have forced construction delays in some of the local road projects slated to receive millions of dollars from the 2006 Tarrant County bond program.

But county officials remain upbeat about the progress of the 74 projects selected for \$200 million in bond funding. Even though some cities have pushed back start dates, many projects are moving forward. So far, nine projects are complete and open to the public.

"It is not uncommon for projects to be delayed," said Randy Skinner, a transportation planner for Tarrant County. "Early on, we did experience some delays because of lack of funding from the cities. But I'm not sure what the reasons have been since."

Skinner said that despite delays in about half the projects, they are all on schedule to be completed within the 10 years of the bond program.

Economic downturn

While the economy has reduced tax revenue in some cities that were approved for funding through the 2006 bonds, the recession has led to lower construction costs for cities that either already had matching funds for their projects or were not hit as hard by declining tax revenue.

The 2006 bond program required that cities match funds and pay for their portions of the road construction projects before Tarrant County would release its share. In some cases, the projects combined local spending, bond proceeds, and matching state or federal funds.

Saginaw raised funds before the economic downturn for an \$11 million expansion of East Bailey Boswell Road, which will become a major east-west thoroughfare. The city is getting about \$7.1 million from the bond program and state funds.

Assistant City Manager Dolph Johnson said that without the 2006 bond program, the city would not be able to afford the expansion.

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"It has been huge in the fact that we've been able to get an \$11 million project done with only 33 percent of the funding," he said. "For us, the bond money goes a long way toward getting a major piece accomplished in our transportation plan."

Other projects

Another recently completed project is a portion of Green Oaks Boulevard in Arlington from Ballpark Way to Texas 360, which was expanded from four lanes to six. The county's bond program is to pick up \$1.75 million of the \$9.6 million project.

Arlington completed this project and planned to start several others this year after voters approved the city's own bond program in 2008.

"The county's bonds helped us stretch our dollars further," said Jill House, the city's assistant director of public works and transportation. "We have only so much debt capacity that we can afford."

Eules completed one of the first projects funded through the 2006 bond program, an extension of Gateway Boulevard from Centurion Way to Glade Road, in 2007. It got a \$600,000 match from the bonds.

Another project under the bond program — expanding Ash Lane from two lanes to four between Aransas Drive and North Main Street — is expected to be completed by January 2011, said Ron Young, Eules' director of public works and engineering.

He said the city had set aside funds in its five-year transportation plan for the Ash Lane expansion.

"We're seeing bids come in at a good rate," he said. "Whether it is materials or labor costs, I'm not sure. But if you have the funds available, it is a good time to be building."

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DATE DISTRIBUTED 1-21-10 DATE OF ARTICLE 1-21-10 NEWSPAPER WEST LAKE

Westlake Picayune

West Lake Hills mayor pays up, dons Eules Trinity jersey

Thursday, January 21, 2010 | Ed Allen



West Lake Hills Mayor Dave Claunch pays up on his bet with Eules Mayor Mary Lib Saleh as Councilman Andrew Schwartz looks on. The mayors made a friendly wager before the Class 5A, Division I, state championship football game between Westlake and Eules Trinity that the mayor from the city whose team lost must wear the opposition's jersey at the next council meeting. Claunch paid his debt, but was none-too-thrilled about wearing the Trinity jersey. Trinity defeated Westlake 41-38 in overtime to win the title.