

New tax for public safety?

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City Councilor Sam Yoon is proposing a new sales tax, specific to the city's borders, that he says could raise upwards of \$35 million for public safety initiatives.

At the May 2 meeting of the Boston City Council, Yoon outlined his call for a .5 percent sales tax, an initiative that would require legislative approval.

"How are we going to address crime and violence in the city?" Yoon asked, setting the stage for his idea. "This [tax proposal] simply says that for every \$10 that is spent in the City of Boston, that a nickel, that is .5 percent of any sales revenue that is generated... will go into a special fund, managed by the city for the purpose of executing a comprehensive strategy for fighting crime and violence."

By way of comparison, Yoon said the new tax would raise one-tenth of the \$350 million revenue generated by the state's existing 5 percent sales tax. Like that tax, similar exemptions would be in place for necessities such as food and clothing.

"We are in the season right now where we talk about money," Yoon said. "We are talking about resources and there are a lot of proposals, many of them really good proposals, that we are all discussing regarding how we can address what I think, and the public thinks, is the number one problem facing the city - violent crime."

"We do need to look at the question of resources. I don't think there is a way we can avoid that. The revenue projections are such that the city will not end up with a surplus. One thing we all know on the city and the state level is that we need to create more sources of revenue to meet the needs of our city. This would be one of those other sources."

Yoon said he had no intention for his proposal to "compete with" the Mayor's proposal for an increased sales tax in Boston. He said he appreciates the Mayor's concept that the increased meals tax would "go towards property tax relief" a matter that "competes with crime and violence as being one of the top issues in the city."

"I think both of these proposals can act in concert up at the State House," he said.

"At the very least, I am putting this out there as a way to introduce the question of resources into our conversation about how we deal with public safety and crime in the city," Yoon added.

City Councilor Rob Consalvo praised Yoon's "thinking outside the box," but held back from giving his full support.

"He's right on the money with this one," Consalvo did say of Yoon's call for revenue diversification. "We are continually reliant on property taxes and local aid and we are not getting the kind of funding we need to put public safety measures in place."

Consalvo said he is concerned that the new revenue could be used to reduce city funding for certain programs, rather than supplement them as intended.

"I wouldn't want to see a reduction in services to compensate for that \$35 million or for budget writers in any department to say, 'Oh well, we're going to get \$35 million in extra revenue, I can shift money to other places. The agencies need to stay where they are budgeted and I would hope this is on top of that so we can get the true impact of providing additional resources for public safety.'"

"I looked at it and it is a great idea," said City Councilor Steve Murphy. "But I don't think it will ever get past one {Speaker of the House} Salvatore DiMasi."

Nevertheless, Murphy praised the .5 percent tax.

City Councilor Chuck Tuner expressed some concern about the plan.

"My reservation is that, at a time when people in this city are really struggling with the question of how they pay for health care, how they pay their rent and how they deal with the general rising cost of living, moving forward with a tax where the burden falls more on those with lesser incomes than higher incomes - what we call regressive taxes. I have great reservations about moving forward with a tax that could potentially hit those with lesser incomes."

"In times of fiscal distress, we really do need to look at new and creative ways to make sure we continue to fund those very important city services - public safety, teachers, firefighters," City Council President Maureen Feeney said. "But we also need to make sure that we address those quality of life issues that can really pile up and build up and drive people from the city."

She looked forward to a "great opportunity for discussion" as Yoon's proposal is debated in upcoming council hearings.

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