

taxes

each city the county – Norton, Lenora, Almena, Clayton and Edmond – based on population.

Miller said that the county expected to generate only about \$189,000 per year from the sales tax, but the collection has exceeded that figure each year. That money is used to supplement county operations and keep property taxes lower than they would be without the sales tax.

In the two decades since 1990, the overall assessed valuation in Norton County – the figure tax rates are based on – has increased from \$27,716,895 to \$38,980,437 in 2010. Wyatt said that the 40.6 percent increase in valuation stems from several factors, not the least of which are decisions made outside the county. Valuations are determined separately for real estate, state assessments, severed minerals, personal property, utilities and oil production.

While real estate is valued based on its market price, oil and ag use land are taxed on production. The state assesses utilities and sets the formula for farm land.

“Oil production influences the market value of property,” Wyatt said. “The (tax) value is determined by the value of the product, which can fluctuate from year to year. It’s not a matter of how much the wells are worth, but how much the product is worth at any given time.”

In Kansas, county budgets are set forth in terms of mills, or one one-thousandth of a dollar. In county government terms, a mill



Norton County Bridge Foreman Mark McKenna and a Norton County Bridge crewman installed a new bridge north of Norton this September. The new bridge replaces a county bridge that was in disrepair and replaced on the recommendation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. – Photo by Carleen Bell/Norton Telegram

is one one-thousandth of the assessed value of the property in the county, or one tenth of a cent for every dollar in value. That means Norton County raises \$38,980 for every mill of its levy.

Though tax levels and spending have jumped over the past two decades, officials say Norton County is still among the counties

with the lowest tax per capita across the state. According to the Property Value Division of the Kansas Department of Revenue, Norton County boasts the lowest overall tax burden in northwest Kansas, with a rate of \$954 per person in 2010. That figure is less than a third of the tax per capita in Graham County, which was reported at \$3,037 in 2010.

Because the future could bring more budget cuts and more mandates, however, these relatively low tax rates might not last forever.

“As commissioners,” Miller said, “we don’t want to have to raise taxes, because like everyone else, we pay taxes. But if we want this community to grow, we have to spend a little money to make some money.”

state mandates squeeze Decatur County

There are several reasons the county budget has changed in the last 20 years, said Commissioner Stan McEvoy. Around 11 years ago, he said, county taxpayers voted to do away with the intangibles tax, which was levied on investments such as stocks and bonds. The city and the county then had to make up the difference in revenue through the property tax.

What that change really did, said McEvoy, was take the tax off the people who had money and spread it among property owners.

He said he wasn’t sure what the amount was for Decatur County, but it was around \$30,000 a year for the city.

McEvoy served on the Oberlin City Council at the time and has been a county commissioner since January 2007.

Over the years, he said, the state has cut back on revenue sharing for cities and counties. This money helped maintain roads and streets, he said, yet that maintenance still has to be done.

McEvoy said the money from the state was supposed to be permanent, but the state “figured out a way to keep it.” The Legislature turned off the tap during the last recession.

The state continues to require more from counties, he said. New “mandates” have included voting machines and new equipment

for the 911 emergency call center. While there has been some help from the state, he said, it’s not paid for 100 percent and the county gets saddled with the bills and maintenance.

The cost of health insurance has increased, said McEvoy; sales tax revenues have been going down for several years because of the economy; there are more requirements for the landfill; and the Rural Opportunity Zone program has been added, which will cost \$26,000 a year.

Also, said McEvoy, fees and the cost of paperwork for everything are up.

While the property tax levy has increased from 1990 to 2010, it hasn’t actually gone up every year. Looking year to year, there were several years where the taxes decreased.

The biggest jump in taxes was from 1990 to 2000. Over that 10 years, the total levy nearly doubled, from 31.747 to 60.945 mills. During that time, the county’s valuation only increased by \$324,123.

The budgeted expenditures in 1990 were \$2,232,461 compared to \$3,205,358 in 2010, and increase of \$972,897.

The certified budgets for 1990 and 2000 show increases in almost all of the county funds, some close to double.

In those 10 years, county general expen-

ditures increased \$252,438, road and bridge \$229,047, home for the aged \$16,000, fair premiums \$1,425, conservation district \$1,500, hospital maintenance \$28,736, county health nurse \$31,000, extension council \$5,806, mental health \$3,707, mental retardation \$9,466, noxious weed \$13,232, election \$14,000, special liability \$17,500, employee benefits and museum \$2,637.

Accounts that went down include economic development \$1,158, fair maintenance \$5,200 and special bridge \$78,961. The 1990 budget included a one-time reappraisal cost of \$59,947.

From 2000 to 2005, the property tax levy went down 7.955 mills, from 60.945 to 52.990.

The budget went up \$806,189, from \$3,205,358 to \$4,011,547, and the valuation went from \$28,668,477 to \$31,340,457, a gain of \$2,671,980.

From 2005 to 2010, the property tax rate jumped from 52.990 mills to 67.214, up 14.224 mills. In the same time, the budget increased \$145,330 from \$4,011,547 to \$4,156,877.

The valuation dropped in those five years from \$31,340,345 to \$30,893,310, a difference of \$447,147.



Decatur County

Tax rate 1990 – 31.747 mills.

Tax rate 2000 – 60.945 mills.

Tax rate 2010 – 67.214 mills.

Up 111.7 percent over 20 years.

Adjusted for inflation, 31.747 mills in 1990 would equal 52.282 mills in 2010. The adjusted increase is 14.932 mills, or 28 percent over inflation.

Spending 1990 – \$2,232,461.

Spending 2000 – \$3,205,358.

Spending 2010 – \$4,156,877.

Up 86 percent over 20 years.

Adjusted for inflation, \$2,232,461 spent in 1990 would equal \$3,676,175 in 2010. The increase in total spending is \$480,700, or 13 percent over inflation.