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BGR Analyzes Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office Tax on the April 30 Ballot

Today, the Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR) releases a new report, *On the Ballot: Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office Tax, April 30, 2022*. The report is intended to help Jefferson Parish voters make an informed decision on whether to approve a new 7-mill, 10-year property tax for the Sheriff's Office. The report analyzes the Sheriff's plan to use the estimated $28 million in annual tax revenue to raise employee salaries by an average of 25% and fill nearly 250 vacant positions. It also provides BGR's position in support of the tax. Click here to read the full report or the InBrief summary.

BGR finds that the Sheriff has demonstrated new revenue is necessary to address growing problems with retention and hiring that have left the office understaffed. The number of vacant positions has surged in the past nine months, rising from about 100 to nearly 250, or 17% of the office's workforce. The vacancies are largely concentrated in several essential positions, including correctional officers, 911 dispatchers and patrol deputies. The report finds that the unfilled positions drive up overtime costs and pose a potential risk to public safety if not addressed in a timely fashion.

The Sheriff's Office developed a detailed spending plan that shows citizens how it would use the tax revenue to fund raises and fill all authorized positions. Executive staff and division leaders evaluated pay scales position by position to align the new salaries with job responsibilities, improve competitiveness, bring most employees above a livable wage of $15 an hour ($31,200 per year), and reduce inconsistencies in pay for clerical staff. This approach avoided the potential inefficiency and ineffectiveness of an across-the-board raise.

The office's internal deliberations on the pay raise plan relied heavily on informal conversations and supervisors' observations about salary concerns. Going forward, the report urges the Sheriff to conduct exit interviews with departing employees and survey current employees to better understand their non-salary reasons for staying or leaving.

The report finds that the tax could generate surplus revenues in the early years due to lag time in filling the vacant positions. Some of this revenue may be necessary for additional raises to achieve the office's staffing goals. The language of the ballot proposal also allows the Sheriff to use the money for equipment and training. The Sheriff told BGR he will review the millage rate annually and consider levying a lower rate if the pace of hiring is slower than expected and surplus revenue is accumulating. He would also consider not rolling forward the millage rate to limit surplus revenue growth when property assessments rise. The decision would depend on the office's financial situation and the outlook for major technology, equipment or pay raise needs. BGR's report further calls on the Sheriff to report to the public on its use of surplus funds and the effectiveness of its hiring and retention efforts.

The Sheriff's Office has shown effective financial stewardship through its track record of clean financial audits, near 100% tax collection rates and control of operating costs. The office has not received a tax increase in three decades. The proposed tax's 10-year duration balances the office's need for a stable revenue stream to cover the increased personnel costs and the public's ability to hold the office accountable for its use of tax revenues through the tax renewal process.

Based on this analysis, BGR takes the following position on the tax proposition:

FOR. The Jefferson Parish Sheriff's proposed 7-mill property tax would provide a stable revenue stream to address growing problems with retention and hiring that could pose a risk to public safety. The Sheriff's Office would compete more effectively with other agencies for talented officers, recruits and other employees. Its detailed plan for raising salaries and filling vacant positions would align pay more fairly with employee responsibilities, provide a livable wage for most support staff and reduce overtime costs. The office has also compiled a track record of effective financial stewardship and is putting in place a new strategy for recruitment. A timely response as outlined in the Sheriff's proposal is necessary to prevent the recent spike in resignations from becoming a crisis.

Still, the proposal has some shortcomings that the Sheriff's Office should address. BGR's analysis finds that levying the full 7 mills could generate significantly more revenue than the pay raise plan requires, especially in the early years of the tax. The office should seek to control the accumulation of surplus tax revenue by continuing to develop its recruitment and retention strategy to fill vacancies efficiently and effectively. It should also put in place data collection and analysis techniques to understand employee motivations and help ensure the effectiveness of any future pay raises. While rebuilding its workforce, the Sheriff's Office should look for efficiencies in its authorized positions and publicly document its hiring results and use of surplus revenues. If surpluses persist, the Sheriff should consider lowering the millage rate to avoid overburdening citizens who may themselves be struggling financially. Unnecessarily high taxes in one area can reduce taxpayers' tolerance to finance other needs in the parish.

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