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DOUGLAS COUNTY **Sheriff-police merger plan has tax angle**

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LINCOLN - State Sen. Brad Ashford of Omaha wants to merge law enforcement agencies in Douglas **County**, and he's willing to dangle a sales tax carrot to get it. Ashford said Monday that he is drafting a bill that would allow the **county** to charge a half-cent sales tax if public safety operations merge.

"The bottom line is, we have to reform the way we govern in the metro area," Ashford said. "You have to start somewhere, and this is the biggest elephant in the room."

Under Ashford's plan, the additional sales tax would apply throughout Douglas **County**, including its **cities**. His bill would require that the tax be approved by voters and be offset by reductions in **city** and **county** property taxes.

Ashford said he expects the **merger** would reduce the cost of law enforcement and therefore reduce the total taxes paid by residents.

Initial reactions to Ashford's idea ranged from surprise to skepticism.

Omaha Mayor Jim Suttle was surprised by the proposal, according to spokeswoman Aida Amoura.

"This whole concept had never been discussed with us," she said.

Amoura said the mayor would need to know more about the legislation and the potential cost savings before taking a position.

She said Suttle would try to arrange a meeting with Ashford and **county** representatives to discuss the idea.

County Board Chairwoman Mary Ann Borgeson was not available for comment.

Sen. Abbie Cornett of Bellevue, chairwoman of the Legislature's Revenue Committee and a former Omaha police officer, also said she would have to know much more before she could support the proposal.

"I am conceptually for the **merger** of services," she said, "but I have to see the details."

While open to consolidating law enforcement in the **county**, Cornett asked why it should be tied to a potential sales tax increase. She said **mergers** typically are done because they produce savings, which should reduce property taxes without raising other taxes.

Ashford acknowledged the sales tax option would not be essential to a **merger** plan. **City** and **county** officials could come up with a plan to consolidate the Sheriff's Office and local police departments that does not include a tax shift.

The tax issue is one of many that would have to be worked out, Ashford said. Other issues would include the roles of the Omaha police chief and Douglas **County** sheriff and how to deal with the **city's** pension obligations.

Ashford said he began exploring the idea of a law enforcement **merger** because of resistance to a broader **merger** of **city** and **county** governments. He said he developed the sales tax proposal after realizing there was no legislative support for Suttle's bid to increase the Omaha sales tax by one-half cent.

Omaha, Ralston, Valley and Waterloo currently levy a 1.5 percent sales tax on top of the state's 5.5 percent tax. Bennington has a 1 percent tax.

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