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## Salt Lake County tax hike could derail Corroon guv bid

Politics » Mayor's increase would kick in right at election time.

By [Jeremiah Stettler](#)  
The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 10/29/2009 07:48:29 AM MDT

If Peter Corroon wants to run for governor, he has a funny way of showing it.

With Utahns poised to pick a new governor just one year from now, the Salt Lake County mayor and perceived Democratic frontrunner for the state's highest office has proposed a dramatically downsized budget that also raises taxes.

So if higher property tax bills hit next fall, Corroon could be just days away from the election -- not the best combination by any stretch of the political imagination.

Corroon might say that he cut a staggering \$142 million from the county's budget. That's true. He might say that he replenished the general fund reserve to help preserve the county's coveted triple-A bond rating. That's true. But the mayor also might have to explain his decision to raise \$13.4 more million in taxes. That's also true.

"Obviously, nobody wants to raise taxes," Corroon said. "Politically, it's not a good thing to do. But I thought our budget was the best budget we could put together. The bottom line is I'm always going to do what I think is the right thing, whether it is good for me politically or not."

Corroon hasn't announced whether he will seek the governor's seat, although political pressures are mounting for him to become the Democratic banner-carrier. The mayor says his attention remains fixed on the county's 2010 budget -- not yet approved by the County Council -- which comes amid the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

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Salt Lake County mayor Peter Corroon, perceived Democratic front-runner for Utah governor, wants a dramatically downsized budget that would raise taxes. (Francisco Kjolseth / The Salt Lake Tribune)

But pundits and politicians alike label the soft-spoken Democrat, who snatched the mayor's seat five years ago as a political unknown, as the blue-hued contender with the best shot at governor.

The question is, will Corroon's willingness to balance the 2010 budget with the help of a tax hike undermine his carefully burnished image as a protector of the public purse?

Or will voters prove forgiving of a man who opposed taxpayer funding for the Real Salt Lake soccer stadium during his first term, and then brandished his veto over the summer to keep fellow Democrats from raising taxes before the county had explored more cuts?

Impossible to tell. But Corroon clearly has exposed himself to an electoral attack if he chooses to run for governor, political observers say,

particularly if the incumbent, Gov. Gary Herbert, manages to mend the state's budget without boosting taxes.

Sensitivity over the issue appeared even in the lingo that laced Corroon's budget presentation Tuesday. The mayor never mentioned the word tax "increase." Instead, he dubbed the bump in property tax bills as a "shift" that would offset sagging sales tax revenues.

"It is going to be difficult if he runs in a statewide campaign to not allow himself to be stereotyped as a typical Democrat who is going to raise your taxes," said Quin Monson, associate director of the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University. "It would be a battle that would be winnable, but a difficult one."

Corroon has proposed a radically reduced 2010 budget that would lop the county's overall ledger from \$801 million to \$659 million -- not counting the law enforcement dollars that will leave with the Unified Police Department next year.

Under the plan, the county would cut employees' wages, close 10 recreation centers on Sundays, erase contributions to organizations such as the Utah Cultural Celebration Center and scale back department budgets by sometimes-double-digit percentages.

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"I do not believe we can cut any further without harming the essential services that our county government must provide," he told the County Council on Tuesday.

So Corroon turned to property taxes.

It's a move that Thomas Wright, chairman of the Salt Lake County Republican Party, doesn't think will sit well with voters.

"People are living on less income," he said. "They are learning how to adjust their budgets. Government should learn to do the same."

Corroon can expect an eroded voter base, Wright said, if he chooses to chase the governor's seat.

"People are smart enough to see that Peter has been making all the cuts possible before approaching the subject of raising taxes," countered Weston Clark, chairman of the Salt Lake County Democratic Party. "He has a proven track record of fiscal responsibility."

Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah, suspects the political fallout will be minimal.

"To some people, a tax increase is never justified," Jowers said. "And he will be susceptible to attacks from those groups. But on balance, the average voter will applaud his fiscal discipline and his attempt to solve an incredibly difficult budget year."

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