



The Voter

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Special Edition

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The following article was published in the May 9 weekly edition of the Islander/Island Reporter newspaper. Written by Tiffany Repecki, it is an excellent overview of an important referenda which will be on the November 6 ballot. The League of Women Voters of Sanibel supports public policies that strive for educational excellence, including infrastructure improvements. The Voter editors received permission to rerun the article for our supporters and members.

School district hosts public forum on proposed sales tax



By TIFFANY REPECKI
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With a \$478 million shortfall in capital revenue projected over the next five years, the Lee County School District is seeking one thing that five other "growth districts" in Florida have in place.

At a public forum on May 3 at The Community House on Sanibel, Lee County Superintendent Dr. Greg Adkins and School Board Member Chris Patricca discussed the sales tax referendum set for the November ballot. They covered the district's capital need, how the funding will be spent and more.

According to Adkins, Lee County is one of six growth districts in Florida. The district takes in about 1,500 to 2,000 new students per year from in state, out of state and outside of the country. The district has approximately 94,000 students, making it the ninth largest one in Florida and 32nd in the nation.

Patricca noted that Duval, Hillsborough, Orange, Polk and Sarasota have one thing in common. "They all have a surtax," she said. "Lee County is the only growing county in the state of Florida that does not have a surtax."

Adkins explained that the district had more than \$300 million in capital funding in 2006-07, as compared to just over \$100 million for 2016-17. He cited a reduction in the millage rate, decrease in PECO or Public Education Capital Outlay funds, and lower impact fees as contributing factors. He noted that capital funds are used for the construction of new schools, rebuilding schools, facility improvements, technology, enhancements for progress, and safety and security - not for salaries.

"We're confident we're going to continue growing at the rate that we're going," Adkins said.

He outlined the district's needs as the construction of seven new schools, the rehabilitation of two existing schools and the addition of one high school. Funds are also needed for the ongoing upkeep of things like the district's 799 existing buildings and 118,000 computers, including students' laptops. "We have over 3,000 acres of property that we have to maintain," Adkins said. "We need \$478 million to close the capital revenue gap over five years," he added.

Patricca explained that the sales tax option will bring in the most revenue. The district considered an additional property tax, but it would draw about \$39 million annually as compared to \$59 million. "Impact fees are a tiny piece of the problem," she added.

Both noted that the district's annual debt payment this year totals \$51 million. It could borrow more money, but doing so would increase the annual amount and lengthen the time it takes to repay it. In terms of reducing spending, they explained that the district has cut expenses since the recession. Within the capital fund, funding for the maintenance of existing buildings was reduced by 36 percent and the district increased its borrowing to pay for needed schools, resulting in even less money left.

"We've tightened our belts so tightly, we're starving," Patricca said. "We need schools for our students," she added. "We're not going to get the relief from the state. We need a local solution."

The average family of four in Lee County makes an estimated \$50,000. Patricca noted that the half-cent sales tax would cost them about \$64 per year. "That's less than 18 cents a day," she said. "The tax is not assessed on necessities, such as food and medication," Patricca added. For major purchases, like a vehicle, it would only apply to the first \$5,000.

Based on the district's research, the county surtax will not stand solely on the shoulders of residents. "About one-third of this tax will be assessed on tourists," she said. "It's like building our buildings at a one-third discount," Patricca added.

Adkins explained that without the needed capital revenue, the district will have to rely on more portable classrooms, schools face overcrowding and students could fall behind in learning. He noted that overcrowding is a safety issue, especially for incidents in a hallway. "Trying to get to a problem through all that crowding," Adkins said. "It can be very difficult."

Patricca pointed out that studies have shown a quality education system benefits a community as a whole by raising property values, decreasing crime rates, promoting higher incomes and more.

"This is about the economic health of the entire county," she said. If approved by voters, the surtax will come with an elected board of individuals, who will oversee the funding and report to the public - not the school board. It will also sunset, or expire, after 10 years. "We will have a citizens oversight committee," Patricca said.

On the topic of transparency, she also spent a few minutes addressing what happened with Bonita Springs High School. According to Patricca, the cost estimated for the build out and approved by the board was a "gross underestimation," which ended in a complete restructuring of one department. "We recognized there was a problem," she said. "We brought in professionals to solve that problem."

Patricca noted that there have been no problems since then. "In the state of Florida, it costs \$65 million to build a high school today," she said. According to Patricca, it costs approximately \$34,000 to \$36,000 per student to build a school, as compared to \$23,000 the underestimation had used. The Bonita project will come in at \$35,000.

"I'm here tonight to ask you to rally with us," she said to those in attendance. "I'm going to ask you to please vote yet on the half-cent sales tax," Patricca added. "This is not just about our children. This is about our entire community."

For more information about the referendum, visit www.leeschools.net/change-for-change.

Important Alert: Lee County Commissioners Meeting on May 15 for Conservation 20/20 Budget Discussion

Conservation 20/20 is one of the most important environmental initiatives of our time, affecting our short and long term quality of life in Lee County. The citizens of Lee County voted overwhelmingly (84%) in November 2016 to keep the Conservation 20/20 (environmentally sensitive land purchase program) funded and to continue to purchase land. The League of Women Voters of Sanibel supports policy initiatives such as this.

On May 15th the Board of County Commissioners will discuss at their budget workshop how and by how much they will continue to fund the budget for this program. The Lee County Ordinance states that the fund should not go below \$40 million.

Please take a minute to send an email to the Commissioners. You can send a group email to all or individually or just to your District Commissioner. Below is a simple paragraph that you can cut and paste, or you may use your own similar words and the address of all the commissioners. The more the Commissioners hear from you the better. Please include your name at the end.

Thanks so much for helping to preserve what little land we have left in the midst of the ever growing pace of development!!

Dear Commissioners:

In November of 2016 nearly 84% of your constituents voted in a referendum, giving you a clear mandate to support the Conservation 20/20 program. It is my understanding that you will be meeting on May 15th to discuss funding. I hope, and expect, that you will strongly support full funding of Conservation 20/20 both land acquisition and continued maintenance and restoration.

Thank you!

District 1. Commissioner John Manning dist1@leegov.com
 District 2 Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass. dist2@leegov.com
 District 3 Commissioner Larry Kiker dist3@leegov.com
 District 4 Commissioner Brian Hamman dist4@leegov.com
 District 5 Commissioner Frank Mann dist5@leegov.com

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The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

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