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Destined to Flop?

Income tax referred but not repealed

Facing an angry voter referendum, the Lane County Commission voted 3-2 last week to refer to voters a tax measure they know won't pass.

"We all know what the outcome will be," said Commissioner Pete Sorenson, who voted against the tax with Commissioner Bill Fleenor.

Commissioner Bobby Green acknowledged a "high chance" that the tax measure will fail but voted with Commissioners Bill Dwyer and Faye Stewart to refer it to a May vote anyway.

Why? "You're a defeatist," Dwyer said to Sorenson. "I think they [voters] will step up to the plate" and pass the tax measure in May to preserve services, said Dwyer. "If I'm wrong, then it's them that will make the decision and not I."

But Sorenson argued that the commission should repeal the tax and work on rebuilding voter trust and understanding. The referral will only further enflame the "huge firestorm" of voter outrage that erupted after the commission majority enacted a tax that voters defeated just two months earlier, Sorenson said.



Commissioner Bill Fleenor

dum petitioners he spoke with. "We have not laid off one person."

Sorenson also disputed whether the tax would go to fund human services. "To say this tax would help people with Meals on Wheels or veterans services, that's factually not true," he said. "This tax dedicates all of the revenue to public safety."

But Green said that the tax revenue for public safety would allow the county to redirect money it's spending on public safety

'What we're doing is we're poking them [voters] in the face.'

— COMMISSIONER PETER SORENSON

"What we're doing is we're poking them in the face," Sorenson said while gesturing with his pen. "We're poking them in the face with a hot poker and saying, 'You're going to vote for this, you're going to vote for this or else, and you know what, it's not going to be my fault, it's going to be your fault'" if services are cut.

"It's tragic that we're going to miss the opportunity to set in motion a time when the public would support the effort that we're doing" to fund county services, Sorenson said.

But Dwyer argued that the county shouldn't try to build voter trust that there really is a crisis by allowing federal revenue cuts to take effect. The cuts would be "dismantling social services, critical services" and laying off 250 county workers and cutting animal regulation and veterans care, he said.

"How do you build trust, by being so far down in a hole people feel sorry for you and give you a hand-out? The people who don't want the taxes don't recognize that," Dwyer said. Dwyer said he doubted whether tax opponents "really care about" the cuts the county will have to make.

But Sorenson said if Congress cuts its Lane County payment, the new local tax revenue won't be available in time to avoid cuts even if the May measure passes. "You're not going to get the money, so what's the point of doing that?"

Fleenor echoed Sorenson's concerns. He said he and other voters are not convinced the county faces an immediate emergency. "There's a lot of outrage in the community. There is a lot of mistrust," he said of referen-

now on other priorities. "It allows you to relieve money to fund those services."

"It's all a bunch of hokey," said Dwyer of Sorenson's arguments. "It's easier to be against something; it's harder to be for something."

Putting the tax on the May ballot would cost at least \$50,000. Because the commission is referring it instead of letting voters refer it, the measure will go to voters more quickly, and the county may have more control over the ballot language.

The county measure would impose a 1.1 percent income tax. Unlike federal income taxes, the rate would be flat, charging the same rate for millionaires as the poor. The county measure also includes a generous loophole for corporations, allowing some of them to dodge most of the tax by not counting income from sales outside the county.

The county also voted to refer a charter amendment capping the tax at 2 percent and dedicating the revenue to public safety. The cap could prevent future efforts at making the tax rate more progressive. Dedicating the revenue to public safety would have more political than practical impact as the new revenue will free up existing revenue dedicated to public safety that could now be spent on anything.

The tax would raise \$33 million. That's more than the estimated \$18 million the county would lose in revenue if Congress fails to pass continued payments to Lane County. A congressional payments measure is tied to a controversial Iraq War funding bill, and its fate remains uncertain. **EW**

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