

School Funding

Broad Income Tax Got Broad No Vote

Last year Eugene voters cast their ballots two-to-one for an income tax to fund schools. This month Eugene voters rejected an income tax for schools by almost a two-to-one margin. What was the difference?

In 2010 successful state Measure 66 was a tax on a small percentage of wealthy people. This month, failed Eugene Measure 20-182 was a tax on everyone but the very poor.

Measure 66 taxed only a few households with incomes over \$250,000. Eugene's failed Measure 20-182 proposed a broad tax on joint incomes over about \$31,000 (AGI).

Conservative opponents to the school funding measure pushed hard to include lower income people in the tax referral, then flipped and made taxes on lower income voters a major focus of the \$109,000 campaign against the measure.

"It should be on income in excess of \$1. I think anybody that makes any money should be taxed," City Council conservative George Poling argued in a Jan. 24 meeting.

"This new city income tax, it's just too much when many of us are struggling to make ends meet," an actress with a little girl in her lap said into the camera in a widely aired commercial by opponents. The slick negative TV ad was funded by huge contributions from wealthy local conservatives and featured dark lighting and somber music.

Parents who pushed the council to refer the school funding measure asked for the tax to only apply to those making more than \$50,000 a year. But they apparently lacked the five votes on the council to push for a higher-income measure that would be more likely to pass.

Council moderates Andrea Ortiz, Alan Zelenka, George Brown and Chris Pryor all argued for the local school tax to have a broad impact, unlike Measure 66.

"The smart thing to do is put in a flat tax that covers a lot more people," Zelenka said, arguing that a broad tax would have a "greater chance of passing."

"I'm hearing that people are feeling that it should not necessarily be a progressive tax, that we should hit people across the board," Ortiz said.

But including poorer voters won little apparent support at the ballot box. Hitting people across the board also hit voters across the board. Measure 66 hit only the top 3 percent of income earners. Eugene's Measure 20-182 hit two-thirds of taxpayers.

While broadening the tax impact may have gathered stronger support on the council, which voted 6-2 to refer the tax,

it did not help its appeal with citizens who voted 62 percent, almost two-thirds, "No." Broadening the tax also did not restrain record-breaking spending by wealthy conservatives against the tax.

A *Register-Guard* editorial last year tied the limited three-percent impact of Measure 66 to its easy passage. The State Legislature that referred the measure "had a firm grasp of the politics of self-interest," the *R-G* wrote.

Judging by the Eugene measure's results, the Eugene City Council did not.

In truth, the potential impact of the Eugene measure was mostly on the rich. An estimated 84 percent of the tax revenue would have come from the top 20 percent of incomes, based on state tax data and calculations from the tax's progressive rate structure.

But that information was lost in a barrage of negative campaign ads and was never reported by the *R-G*, which opposed the school funding measure.

Tax measure opponents outspent supporters by about 50 percent. That's a reverse from Measure 66, where supporters outspent opponents by 50 percent.

Four years ago, when the *R-G* supported a failed county income tax for jails on the ballot, *R-G* coverage emphasized the need for the funding in numerous articles and editorials and reported accurately on the amount of the tax and its impact on the average taxpayer without reporting jail salaries. But with the schools measure, the *R-G* put an article by a relative of the publisher on its Sunday front page listing teacher salaries and benefits on the top voting day of the election. The paper and local television also reported inflated and misleading numbers for the amount of the tax and its impact on the average taxpayer without fact checking.

The deep recession combined with the broader impact to also make the local school measure hard to pass. With many taxpayers struggling, school tax measures failed in many elections across the state including in Portland.

"Americans for Prosperity" the Tea Party group funded by the right-wing Koch oil billionaires, crowed "tremendous victories" on its Oregon website after the state-wide school defeats. The AFP group played a key early role in organizing opposition to Eugene school funding.

"We have built a successful model that produces the kind of lasting political change our mission statement demands," the group wrote. That mission, critics charge, includes the elimination of public education. **EW**

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