

Naples Daily News

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School Board to decide in May on half-cent sales tax referendum

By DEIRDRE CONNER, daconner@naplesnews.com

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Lee County residents will know by May whether they will vote on a half-cent sales tax in the fall.

Though its prospects looked gloomy earlier this month, the referendum reappeared on the front burner Friday as Lee School District officials sketched out a schedule: The School Board will decide in the first week of May whether to go ahead with the measure, and it could be on the ballot as early as September.

If approved, the half-cent sales tax would generate approximately \$45 million a year to build new schools and renovate old ones. New projections released Friday put estimated spending for new schools at close to \$1.3 billion over the next 10 years.

Two weeks ago, Superintendent James Browder recommended the board wait until 2008 to put the sales tax on the ballot and, until then, borrow the money needed to build new schools. The referendum appeared to be at a standstill.

But after learning this week that the district's debt load will top \$800 million next year, some board members say they want to reconsider. At their Thursday meeting, board member Steven Teuber and Vice Chairman Bob Chilmonik said annual debt service payments of \$48 million are enough to warrant the referendum.

Before they decide, district officials will wait for the results of the county's study on school impact fees, as well as the state Legislature's decision to hold a statewide referendum on class-size reduction. Gov. Jeb Bush wants voters to change the class-size amendment they approved in 2002 by allowing districts to calculate class size as a countywide average. It would also set minimum teacher salaries at \$35,000 per year.

If it goes to Florida voters, the district could hold the referendum at the same time without paying

much. A stand-alone referendum would cost \$600,000, Browder said.

To get the referendum passed, however, board members say they have to spend the spring improving their public image. Much of their Friday retreat focused on how to reverse the recent public relations nightmares that arose from a botched survey and issues with school safety. School construction and how to pay for it have already stressed a school board that has been relatively congenial for the last year.

Board Chairwoman Elinor Scricca said she wanted to make sure board members didn't fight at the meeting table, almost certainly referring to a heated exchange earlier this year between Chilmonik and Teuber. At a Feb. 10 school board briefing, Teuber criticized Chilmonik's push to investigate the safety of a vibrating floor at Caloosa Middle School in Cape Coral. He called Chilmonik's vocal concerns about the school a "platform for a personal agenda."

Scricca said the board needs to present a unified front.

"The problem comes when there might appear to be some fracturing between and among some board members. The media will fuel that flame and make that fracture an open wound," Scricca said. "We don't want that here."

Personal attacks are uncalled for, said board member Jane Kuckel, but it's unrealistic to expect that they won't have differences over the issues that face them.

"I think we are going to have more 3-to-2 votes or 4-to-1 votes," she said.

In addition, board member Jeanne Dozier pressed the board and Browder to schedule meetings with the editorial boards of the Naples Daily News, the News-Press and the Cape Coral Daily Breeze, as well as with the managers of local television stations.

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