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Poll: Voters oppose tax increase for schools

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By a wide margin, Wake County voters would rather avoid a tax increase than keep students from attending mandatory year-round schools, according to a poll for The News & Observer and WRAL-TV.

The poll casts doubt on the Wake school board's ability to get voters to approve any bond issue for new schools in November — and a lot of worried Wake parents may have no choice but to adapt to a year-round schedule.

"We are going to have to show the need for the investment and the work that has to be done," Commissioner Joe Bryan said. "This is a tall order, because clearly this is a defining moment for Wake County."

The poll of 603 likely voters, conducted May 10 and 11, found that 27 percent support the school district's proposed \$998 million spending plan, which probably would require a property tax increase. At that spending level, most elementary schools would be converted to a year-round calendar in 2007.

There was 33 percent support for a \$1.15 billion option that wouldn't require any year-round conversions but would raise taxes more.

The most support — 64 percent — was for a \$625 million plan that would not increase property taxes. Voters in the poll said they'd take this option even knowing it could lead to most elementary and middle schools going to a year-round calendar, high schools operating on split sessions and many renovation projects being cut.

"It's worse than I feared," Bryan said. "The \$625 million will not meet the current needs now, and certainly not over the next 10 years."

Wake County needs more space to deal with record growth.

The school board is scheduled to vote on the three-year, \$998 million proposal Tuesday. The county commissioners would then decide whether to place a bond issue, probably for about \$850 million, on the November ballot.

School board members and commissioners will have to decide whether to try to rally public support for the \$998 million proposal or come up with an alternative.





"People think the only thing to do is to raise taxes," said the Rev. William Sanderson, senior pastor of Hephzibah Baptist Church in Wendell, who participated in the poll. "But you don't have to."

The poll results were similar to those of a survey by the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce. It found weak support for any bond issue that would raise taxes. The lack of public support for spending between \$1.3 billion and \$1.9 billion in the Chamber poll had led the school board to try to cut the plan to less than \$1 billion.

"It's very discouraging," said Tony Gurley, chairman of the board of commissioners, "knowing all of the work and effort that's gone into developing what I thought to be a reasonable building program."

The new poll indicates that getting the spending plan to less than \$1 billion isn't enough to gain voters'

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support, because it could lead to a tax increase of 3 to 5 cents per \$100 of assessed property value, or \$45 to \$75 per year on a \$150,000 home.

School board member Lori Millberg echoed Gurley's sentiments. "It seems the poll results have gotten worse," she said.

Skepticism about the school system, especially after a fraud case involving the transportation department, might have contributed to the most recent results. Forty-seven percent of voters labeled the quality of the school system "fair" or "poor," compared to 42 percent who said it was "good" or "excellent."

"It's not a question about taxes as much as it is about whether the school system is spending our money wisely," said North Raleigh parent Jeff Wooten, who did not participate in the poll. "We think the school system can do a much better job without raising taxes."

The year-round issue

Parental opposition to mandatory year-round schooling had prompted school leaders to talk informally with the county commissioners about raising the amount of the plan to \$1.3 billion.

Some parents have threatened to vote against any bond issue that would require a widespread year-round conversion. Wake Families for School Choice, a grass-roots advocacy group, will hold a protest march at 3 p.m. Tuesday at the school system's central administration building before the school board's vote.

Hope Carmichael, a spokeswoman for Wake Families for School Choice, is optimistic the school board will end up converting fewer schools. She said the school board should switch to two smaller bond issues over the next couple of years as a way to get voter approval.

"I believe the public, once educated, will turn around," Carmichael said. "I think we have intelligent people in Wake County who want to have a good education system."

A year-round school can hold more students than a traditional school by keeping the building in constant use. Students are divided into four "tracks," with three in school and one off. Students take more frequent breaks during the school year but do not get the long summer vacation that a traditional calendar offers.

Converting 50-plus elementary schools to a multitrack, year-round calendar would eliminate the need for six new elementary schools costing \$150 million.

A majority of voters in the poll — 52 percent — said they want to avoid a tax increase, no matter how many schools are converted to mandatory year-round.

"I oppose any tax increase at all," said Raymond Harris of Wendell, one of the people polled. "We've got the lottery. That's what it's meant for."

Wake would get \$9 million a year from the lottery, less than half the cost of one new elementary school.

Wake voters may be used to the idea that bond issues won't raise property taxes. After a \$650 million school bond issue with a tax increase was defeated in 1999, county leaders stressed to the public that bond issues in 2000 and 2003 wouldn't raise taxes.

North Raleigh parent Scott Moore said he would put his children in private school if the anti-tax opposition results in mass year-round conversion.

"They just don't want their taxes raised," said Moore, who wasn't polled. "It's so close-minded around here."

Alternative funding?

The poll also found opposition to using alternative funding for school construction. Only 29 percent of voters said they'd favor an impact fee on new home construction that could add \$3,000 to \$5,000 to the cost of a new home.

"Finding a home is already hard enough as it is in Wake County," said Ira Schaub of Raleigh, who participated in the poll.

Support was slightly higher — at 37 percent — for a 1 percent tax on real-estate sales that would increase closing costs by about \$1,500.

The most support — 42 percent — was shown for a half-cent increase in the local sales tax.

“I’m not going to support anything that’s going to raise property taxes on homes,” said Broadus Riggins of Wendell, who participated in the poll. “If you’re going to make it fair, have a sales tax where everybody will pay.”

The poll results were frustrating to North Raleigh parent Sharon Eckard. She argued that the cost of building enough schools to avoid year-round conversions — possibly \$75 to \$105 a year more in property taxes on a \$150,000 home — would be modest.

“It’s a sad, sad commentary on the people living in this area,” said Eckard, who was not polled.

School board chairwoman Patti Head acknowledged that school and county leaders have plenty of work to do before November.

“It tells me we have to do a lot of education of the public,” Head said. “We’re in a crisis mode. The public has to have a full understanding of it.”

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