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Sales tax? Good luck hiking one in Brevard

1-cent increase is a tough sell

*BY JEFF SCHWEERS
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Asking voters to approve a one-cent sales tax has emerged as the only option on the table for raising the money needed to build roads and prevent gridlock.

Nobody wants to raise the local gas tax with prices closing in on \$3 a gallon.

And not enough county commissioners want to raise the transportation impact fees on new homes.

That leaves the sales tax. One penny. Five years. \$350 million.

Too bad voters seem to be against it.

"They spend it on everything other than what they're supposed to spend it on," said Chuck Olinger of Palm Bay.

Some commissioners are reluctant to even put it on the ballot, fearing voters would shoot it down the way they did a 20-year, \$1.3 billion sales tax referendum three years ago. They've been inundated with e-mails from constituents saying no more taxes.

For example, Scott Fee of Melbourne wrote: "Property taxes have skyrocketed for homebuyers. Use that windfall for the roads."

And Debby Theisen, also of Melbourne, wrote that she'd vote against a sales tax increase until county and city officials controlled growth.

They feel overtaxed. They don't think developers and newcomers are paying their share. And they don't trust their government.

"I firmly believe a sales tax will fail at the ballot," Commission Chairwoman Helen Voltz said two weeks ago. She'd consider a temporary sales tax for roads only after proving to residents that the board has exhausted all other "legitimate" means of funding -- but in the same breath ruled out the gas tax and impact fees.

Raising the gas tax 1 cent per gallon would raise about \$2.5 million a year. Raising it to the maximum 6 cents allowed would raise \$15 million a year.

Raising the transportation impact fee to its fully recommended level of \$4,500 per new home would bring in about \$22 million a year -- but it can't be bonded and can only be used in the areas where it was collected.

The sales tax comes closest to paying for the backlog of growth-related projects -- at \$70 million a year. The tax would give \$248 million to the county, \$28 million to Palm Bay, \$25.5 million to Melbourne and almost \$14 million to Titusville.

Commissioner Jackie Colon canceled a talk with residents of Lockmar Estates on Thursday. Her office said she had a scheduling conflict.

"When in doubt, tax," said Carl Wannamaker, the government liaison for the Lockmar Estates Homeowners Association.

City officials who have been pushing the sales tax referendum say they're running out of time as well as options. Cocoa, Melbourne and Rockledge have endorsed the sales tax. Palm Bay and Titusville have discussed it.

"If not this year, then when?" Melbourne City Manager Jack Schluckebier asked.

Not putting it on the ballot "just delays the possibility that there will be any way to resolve these problems," he said. "They are expensive and take a long time to fix."
