

“Yes for Schools” not a Slam Dunk

On November 5, Halifax County citizens have a once in a lifetime opportunity to raise funds to improve county schools. A “yes” vote on the General Retail Sales Tax Referendum permits the county to implement an additional sales tax not to exceed one percent to support school construction projects in Halifax County. The additional sales tax is projected to generate \$100 million over the next thirty years. At least twenty percent of the additional taxes will be paid for by visitors to the county. State law clearly stipulates that funds generated by the sales tax can only be used by Halifax County for school construction and that the tax will go away after the bonding period. The sales tax does not apply to groceries, medication, or automobile purchases.

Two independent architectural studies along with the recent Halifax County Strategic Plan, in which 2,000 citizens participated, and general public sentiment coalesce around the opinion that the school most in need of improvement is the high school. Counties across the commonwealth, facing their own public school capital needs challenges, already are planning similar sales tax referendums based on Halifax County results.

Yet, polling conducted in July revealed a surprising result. The “Yes for Schools” vote – a reasonable, education-focused, equitable and impermanent tax solution – is not a slam dunk.

The Yes for Schools Team, of which I am a member, has made every effort to listen and understand the opinions of those who do not support the referendum. Frequently, opinions have been formed with incomplete information, which is why town hall meetings are being held in each of the county’s eight election districts. It is a healthy process of information sharing and question answering that is a shining example of democratic community engagement.

In the end, while we may not all agree, I recognize that my fellow citizens are just as sincere and earnest in their opposition as I am in support of the sales tax referendum. We all want what’s best for Halifax County, we just don’t agree on how to get there. Because this is such an important decision for Halifax County, however, I respectfully ask those who oppose the sales tax referendum to indulge me one more time. Please consider the following responses to some of the primary reasons given for opposing to the tax referendum. Please be sure your opinions are supported by the facts.

Sales Tax Tied to High School Rebuild

For several years, blistering discussion and debate have swirled around the question of whether to renovate or rebuild the high school. Many mistakenly believe the sales tax referendum is tied to a new high school and, therefore, will not support it. This is not the case as no final decision has been made. Regardless of what is ultimately decided, however, sales tax generated funds will be necessary to accomplish either option – renovate or rebuild. Without the sales tax, we are dead in the water. So, let’s focus on clearing the sales tax hurdle first and then tackle the “renovate versus rebuild” question. County Administrator Scott Simpson is working with Halifax

County Public School Superintendent Dr. Mark Lineburg to develop long-term financial scenarios for both options. Election district town halls again will be used to share this information with the public, answer questions, and gather feedback about what is the best option. Help us clear the sales tax hurdle and then, as a community, let's drill down on the numbers to determine which fiscal option is best for Halifax County.

Lack of Current Building Maintenance and Upkeep

Maintenance and upkeep of the current high school is another question of ongoing public debate. Many are reluctant to vote for an additional sales tax to fund a new or renovated facility when, in their estimation, the current high school hasn't been properly maintained. Why, they reason, should taxes be raised for a building that we can't trust will be properly maintained? As my late father would say, this is like cutting your nose off to spite your face. Why deprive Halifax County's children of a modernized high school because of past delinquencies not otherwise under their control? Instead, let's trust Dr. Lineburg and his team to turn the maintenance and upkeep situation around. For some of you, that may be hard to swallow, but I can assure you that Dr. Lineburg is aware of and responding to the problem. Future budgets now will include a line item for ongoing maintenance, specifically for the high school. And if you still have doubts, you can plan to join the committee of citizens, businesses and community leaders being formed to ensure maintenance accountability. Don't let past maintenance delinquencies spoil Halifax County's chance to provide our children with a solid educational (and economic) future.

Just Like the Courthouse

Other arguments link the sales tax referendum with the courthouse on two fronts. One perspective suggests that the county can't afford a new or renovated high school because it's still paying for the courthouse. This is incorrect. The courthouse is paid for courtesy of the 2 cents real estate tax imposed in 2015. Another perspective advises that approving the sales tax and rebuilding or renovating the high school sets the county up for another courthouse debacle. In fact, the situation with the courthouse occurred because the county took a reactive approach to repairing an aging facility – the courthouse. By waiting until something *had* to be done, the project ended up costing the county much more than if it had been proactive. By approving the sales tax, we will be putting the county in a proactive position to address high school building shortcomings. Only if we wait, are we at risk of repeating a courthouse-level mistake. So let's not wait for the high school to go the way of the courthouse. Passing the sales tax referendum will prevent the county from repeating another unforced error.

Final Thoughts

An estimated 10,000 voters will show up to the polls on November 5, requiring an excess of 5,000 "YES" votes to pass the referendum. I encourage everyone who supports the Yes for Schools sales tax referendum not to take this vote for granted. It is not a slam-dunk, so come out and cast your vote in support of Halifax County Schools. For those on the fence or completely opposed to the sale tax referendum, I respectfully ask you to consider the

information and responses offered in this editorial. Please be sure you have all the facts before you decide. Your decision impacts not just our schools and children, it will determine Halifax County's future ability to remain educationally and economically relevant.

Dr. Betty Adams