

Broward voters likely to defeat proposals to raise sales and property taxes

By Buddy Nevins
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Most Broward County residents who are likely to vote oppose a new property tax for a courthouse expansion and **an increase in the sales tax to pay for transportation improvements**, according to a *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* poll.

"It doesn't look good for these ballot measures," said pollster Del Ali, who conducted the survey.

The proposal to increase the sales tax to 7 cents from 6 cents to enhance transportation was supported by 36 percent of likely voters polled. It was opposed by 55 percent, with 9 percent undecided.

Selling \$450 million in courthouse bonds, which would be repaid by additional property taxes, was backed by 33 percent of those surveyed. The measure was opposed by 57 percent, while 10 percent were undecided.

Both proposals would need more than 50 percent of the votes cast to pass.

With early voting starting today in Broward, Ali said time is running out.

"Any initiative that has under 50 percent support at this point is very hard to pass," the pollster said. "You never say impossible, but it is very hard at this point."

The countywide telephone survey of 400 likely voters was conducted Oct. 16-19 by Research 2000 of Rockville, Md., for the *Sun-Sentinel*. The sampling error margin is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

The poll results did not disturb James Cummings, the contractor leading the effort to pass the transportation tax. He said voter sentiment would change during the next two weeks as the pro-tax People for Progress in Broward County roll out a massive advertising campaign.

The political action committee had raised \$501,596, mostly from the business community, and spent \$331,672 as of Sept. 29. The group continues to raise money, and Cummings said voters will see billboards, fliers mailed to their homes, and television and radio advertising promoting the sales tax increase.

"We will be educating voters, and once folks know what they are getting -- more buses, a synchronized traffic light system, light rail -- we will gain more support," Cummings said.

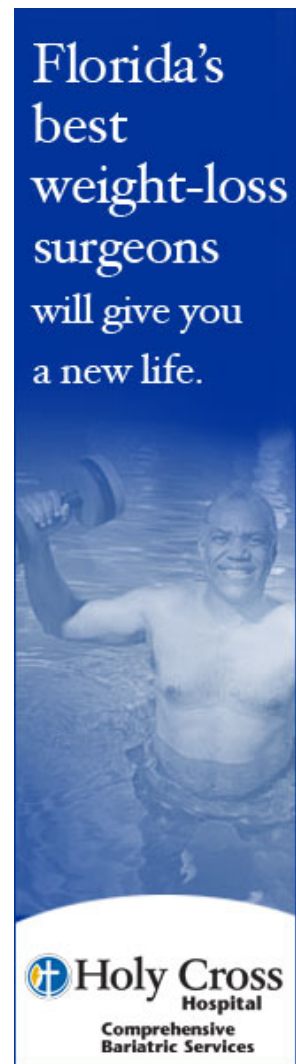
Anti-tax leader Mark Eckert of Ax The Tax said Cummings was right.

"People for Progress will be able to close that gap. It will be close," said Eckert, whose group plans to mail anti-tax literature to voters and put up signs before the Nov. 7 election.

Colleen Stolberg, of Fort Lauderdale, said she opposes the transportation tax because the County Commission would control the \$13 billion for improvements raised over the next 25 years.

"I don't trust them to do what's right," said Stolberg, who did not participate in the poll.

She was leaning toward supporting the courthouse improvement bonds because "my husband is a lawyer. The



courthouse is falling apart."

Sophie Bock, a Democratic political leader in Century Village of Pembroke Pines, said most of her neighbors had already decided to oppose both tax increases. The condominium complex already has its own extensive bus service and many residents think there are greater needs for taxes than building courts, she said.

"People here don't seem to be in favor of it," said Bock, who did not participate in the poll.

One problem for tax proponents is voters may not perceive they would benefit, Ali said.

"To get people to increase a tax, which goes against the grain, you have to explain what it does to improve their quality of life," he said.

Broward Chief Judge Dale Ross agreed that it will be tough to convince voters that a new high-rise courthouse in downtown Fort Lauderdale and the renovation of satellite courthouse facilities in Hollywood, Deerfield Beach and Plantation are benefits worth paying more taxes.

"About 94 percent of the people have never been to the courthouse. It's an abstract to them," Ross said. "But we're what's between these average people and lawlessness. What goes on in court protects people, protects the elderly, protects children."

Over the next two weeks, Ross said, judges and lawyers will speak to clubs and condominium groups in favor of the courthouse expansion bonds, which would be repaid through property taxes.

The speaking engagements are needed because people don't understand why they should pay for new courts, and that is reflected in the poll results, said Alan Levy of Fort Lauderdale, president of an agriculture marketing firm and a business community activist.

"How can you expect people to vote for something they don't know about? There hasn't been enough preparation for this," Levy said.

County Commissioner John Rodstrom opposed the penny sales tax increase because he thought the business group was promising improvements they couldn't deliver, but he backs the courthouse bond referendum. He said the poll results don't surprise him.

"I always thought it was an uphill battle," Rodstrom said.

Rodstrom said even if the two tax increases fail, the issues are not dead.

"If it takes going back to the people multiple times, we'll do it," he said.

Buddy Nevins can be reached at bnevins@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4571.

Inside

Candidates Ellyn Bogdanoff and Christian Chiari battle for the state House District 91 seat. 1B

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