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Realtors oppose Clay tax vote

Jordan Schrader

Realtors and developers have spent more than \$36,200 — or \$4.38 per registered voter — persuading Clay County voters to reject a tax on real estate sales. Friday will show if their supporters care enough to start their holiday weekend in the voting booth.

Hoping to build a new primary school, Clay is the 20th county seeking to triple the land transfer tax, but the first to consult voters on a Friday — right before Labor Day, no less. Commissioners will set another first if they succeed. Voters everywhere have rejected the tax. “Ultimately, we’ll find out (Friday), but we think from what we’re hearing locally — the reports from the grass-roots folks — is that there is a high level of energy and enthusiasm, more so than the county commissioners probably anticipated,” said Rick Zechini, the N.C. Association of Realtors’ director of government affairs.

Unusual date

Zechini and other critics of the extra 0.4 percent tax on sellers said the voting date is meant to depress turnout.

“We think this is an extremely sneaky and underhanded way of trying to get a tax increase through,” said Michael Sanera, an analyst for the John Locke Foundation, a Raleigh think tank that advocates small government.

Board of Commissioners Chairman Hub Cheeks said he didn’t realize when the date was set that it fell on the day before Labor Day, but he said more people would be in town than if the election had been held before school started.

“We did not try to pull the wool over people’s eyes in no way,” Cheeks said.

He said it hasn’t deterred voting. More than 1,240 people have voted early or absentee, according to the elections board.

Commissioners withdrew the election from its original date, during a state runoff, after they missed a deadline to notify voters in print.

Residents are fighting back with yard signs, phone calls and mailers.

Through Aug. 8, the committee organizing the campaign received \$10,000 from the N.C. Home Builders Association and more than \$32,500 from the Realtors group, which also loaned the committee \$15,000.

“Seems like it’s about every week something has been in the mail against, and phone calls have been made probably for the last month, also on a weekly basis,” Cheeks said.

School crowding

The Locke Foundation says Clay’s tax revenue per person, adjusted for inflation, has grown 43 percent from 2002-07 to reach \$855.

But Cheeks said overcrowding on the county’s single school campus has made it vital to build a fourth building there for students in second grade and lower.

The single cafeteria accommodates all of about 1,400 students, he said, but only by stretching lunch from 10:30 a.m. to about 1:30 p.m.

The land transfer tax would have raised about \$350,000 last year, covering more than half the payment on a \$10 million school-construction loan, Cheeks said.

Local Realtor Liz McLamb agreed expansion is needed, but a bond vote would be a better option. Cheeks said that would also require taxpayers to make payments.

“We’ve been anticipating this for years now,” McLamb said of the school needs. “This is not a big surprise for Clay County.”
