

A SCHOOL SALES TAX FOR MEDINA COUNTY?

By Commissioner Pat Geissman

Recently the Medina County Commissioners were asked to consider placing on the May ballot a proposed .5% sales tax increase for the benefit of all of the school systems in Medina County. A recent editorial in the Medina County Gazette encouraged our Board of Commissioners to take leadership and "step up to the challenge" by placing the proposed issue on the ballot.

The tax increase as proposed, would be for a period of 30 years and would fund permanent improvements of the county's seven school districts. In addition, some of the funds granted to each school district would then be distributed to the Medina County Career Center and the Achievement Center for their use. Under the proposal it is believed that permanent improvements could include textbooks, buses, and the construction and repair of buildings. If the proposed tax is approved by the voters, its proceeds, estimated to be approximately \$9.8 Million in the first year, would be distributed to each of the seven districts on what is essentially a per pupil distribution formula by the county.

After the original proposal was presented to the commissioners, Commissioner Hambley additionally proposes that approximately \$1 Million a year be set aside for higher education, further dividing what each school district will receive.

I am very concerned about our schools and the fact that our citizens generally

do not like property tax increases. My school district, Cloverleaf, after several attempts to pass property taxes, took a new approach and successfully passed an income tax issue last November. For years I have supported our schools as our four sons all went to local schools and now our five grandchildren attend county schools. However, I have reservations about this proposal and many questions that need answering before I am ready to vote to place a sales tax increase before our electors.

I was elected to the job of county commissioner to manage the budget and activities of our county government, not the seven school districts in the county. That is why each school district elects its own Board of Education. I work very hard to understand the needs of Medina County Government, and do not consider myself an expert in funding needs of our schools—that is the job our very capable and locally responsive school boards. Yet, if I am being asked to place before the voters of this county a tax increase, I want to know how the money will be used in each district and be sure the need is there.

There has been a lot of talk about how the enactment of a sales tax for schools would allow for a reduction in property taxes. I simply need more information about this before I will be ready to vote. For instance, how much property tax would each district take off, if this tax were to pass” For how long? How would this affect the need for future property tax levies for our schools in the various districts?

On a very fundamental level, however, I am not sure it is the job of the county to fund our schools. The Ohio Constitution requires the state to provide for a “thorough and efficient” system of public education and it is clear that they have not done this to date. Over the past decade, it has been frustrating to hear of the continuing court battles on school funding across our state. It appears that our 68th Governor, when he takes office in January will be making recommendations to the General Assembly on how to solve the state’s school funding dilemma, and I for one want to give him and the Legislature a chance to deliver before I am ready to ask Medina County taxpayers for a 30 year additional tax commitment. Candidate Strickland made funding public education a priority during his campaign. Governor Strickland should be given the opportunity to deliver for Ohio children, including over 30,000 children that attend Medina County schools.

A major concern I have is about the future of Medina County government. If I vote to place this tax on the ballot for our schools, it means that for the next 30 years the future needs of our county government could be shortchanged. Medina county has been fortunate in being able to be one of only four counties still collecting a local tax of .5%. Under Ohio law the counties may enact not more than 1.5% in total on top of the state sales tax, which is currently 5.5%. If our Board submits the tax increase to the electors, it means that there remains only an additional .5% for use for county government purposes during the next 30 years. While I do not foresee the need for such a county tax increase in the near future, I

do not think it is prudent for me to tie the hands of county commissioners elected 20 or more years from now from doing what is right and needed for Medina County government.

There are also a series of legal and technical issues that I need to better understand. I have asked the county's legal advisor for information, I want to be sure that what is being proposed strictly complies with Ohio law.

As I understand the law, if the tax is approved, commissioners must establish a Community Improvement Board to oversee the money and make grants. It is interesting to note that the Board would be composed of 9 members. The Mayor of Brunswick appoints three members and the commissioners appoint six members. Of the six appointed by our board, one must be the mayor of another municipality in the county, one must be a township trustee, and one must be a representative of a major business , trade organization or a representative of a labor organization. I find it interesting that state law does not require any representatives for school districts. My conclusion is that when this law was passed, it was probably not meant to be used for school purposes at all.

As I understand the law, it is the Community Improvement Board that makes initial decisions annually on the amount of money that would be distributed to the various entities. The commissioners could, by a unanimous vote, disallow any grant made by the Community Improvement Board. It should also be noted that under state law the funding would not be limited to schools. Also, the formula

mentioned in the proposal by Medina County schools is not mentioned in state law, and my reading of the law, as a non lawyer, makes me believe that the Community Improvement Board and the commissioners each year could change how the money is distributed. Perhaps, this problem could be solved by specific language on the ballot, which I would also like to see prior to being asked to vote. There is one other issue which I am concerned about that I feel needs to be answered. If we are to place the proposal to a vote in May, I believe it will be necessary to open some precincts that otherwise would not be open as there is no May primary scheduled for 2007.

This is not an inexpensive proposition. The Board of Elections has determined the extra cost that will be borne by our taxpayers to be \$1200 per each of the 150 county precincts for a total of \$180,000 to put the issue on the ballot. Who under the proposal will be paying these costs? The schools or is it expected to come from county coffers?

I believe in our schools, all of which have been rated excellent by the state. Our young people are our future and education is a key factor in promoting and retaining good paying jobs and maintaining the standard of living in our county. I am proud of the education that Medina County students receive from our dedicated superintendents, principals and classroom teachers. But, let's not jump the gun here. We need to take the time to get answers to many of the questions I have raised here along with probably many more.

December -2006