

Commissioners back resolution on uses for sales-tax surcharge

Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2011 **The Durham Herald-Sun**

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DURHAM – County Commissioners on Monday voted unanimously for a nonbinding resolution to repeat earlier promises on how they'd spend a proposed quarter-percent sales-tax surcharge for education.

The resolution says the county would allot 67 percent of the revenue to the Durham Public Schools “to maintain teachers and school personnel” and nearly 22 percent to pay off school-construction-related debt.

Another almost 9 percent would go to Durham Tech to support “need-based” scholarships, and the remaining 2 percent would go to the Durham Partnership for Children to help prepare preschoolers for kindergarten.

The commissioners voted because the state-mandated ballot language for the referendum doesn't specify what the money will be used for.

A second tax referendum on the ballot, a half-percent levy for public transit, specifically ties that surcharge to transit.

Commissioners and other supporters of the quarter-percent levy worry, with reason, that the required ballot wording leaves the proposal open to attack on the grounds that the money can be used by their government for just about anything.

But they're in a political Catch-22 situation because the General Assembly, in giving counties the authority to seek a vote on the quarter-percent surcharge, barred them from using the ballot language to tie the hands of future county boards.

That means, in effect, that “the citizens would be in charge of what happens” to the money in the future via their decisions about who to elect to county office, Commissioner Brenda Howerton said.

But Commissioner Ellen Reckhow said many of the allocations, once implemented, “would be hard for a future board to unwind” once they're baked into the budgets of the county, DPS, Durham Tech and the Partnership for Children.

She singled out the proposed Durham Tech scholarships as something would be “incredibly unpopular” for a future board to repeal.

Commissioners have made it clear they want to backfill some of the budget cuts the General

Assembly has imposed on public education since the economic crash of 2008. Federal economic-stimulus funds have cushioned some of the blow, but are expiring.

The alternative, the resolution said, is “us[ing] the property tax” as the main source for the additional funds.

Monday’s vote wasn’t without controversy, as going into the meeting a Durham County Republican activist had criticized the move as one that amounted to campaigning for the tax with public dollars.

The complaint, from party precinct chairman Richard Ford, prompted county officials to postpone scheduled briefings from the two advocacy groups that have been set up to campaign for the referenda.

Ford objected to them giving the issue any airtime in the commissioners’ televised meeting, given that they hadn’t offered the same chance to individual or groups opposing the levies.

Deputy County Attorney Carol Hammett requested the postponement, saying she needed time to study the legal issues.

The county Republicans have yet to announce a formal position on the referenda proposals, but their leader, county Chairman Ted Hicks, on Sunday said he’d like to see people “vote down these tax proposals.”

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