

Voters OK education sales tax

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DURHAM – Durham voters elected to dig a little deeper into their pockets in the name of education Tuesday, approving a quarter-cent sales tax referendum expected to drum up \$9.2 million annually.

Unofficial returns showed more than 56 percent of voters approving the levy, which will be split among Durham Public Schools, Durham’s Partnership for Children and Durham Technical Community College.

Steve Toler, co-chairman of the committee that promoted the referendum, said he and other supporters of the measure were feeling “joyous relief” Tuesday.

State-mandated language prevented the “Local Sales and Use Tax Referendum” from being explicitly labeled on ballots as supporting education. With the hurdle of educating voters about its intended purpose and the added pressure of a sour economy, education sales tax backers faced “a real challenge,” he said.

With more than 43 percent of voters weighing in against the measure, Ted Hicks, chairman of the Durham County Republican Party, said he saw a turning of the tides in Durham.

“The conservative message of fiscal responsibility is starting to take notice,” he said.

Even if the tides are turning, the measure won out Tuesday, and Hicks said he worries that it will harm local businesses.

“I think our economy will suffer for it. In general, it is bad policy to raise taxes in a recession,” he said, expressing concerns that higher sales taxes will discourage out-of-towners from coming to Durham to do their Christmas shopping.

The sales tax will target shoppers, excluding food, prescription drugs, utilities, housing, motor vehicles and gasoline.

In explaining why support for the measure wasn’t stronger, Toler said he saw “anger and discontent on the part of a number of our citizens” while working at the polls Tuesday.

“It was obvious that some of the people we were asking to support the referendums were angry,” he

said. "They'd been hurt by the economy. The last thing they felt like we needed was a tax."

Some voters also expressed distrust related to the vague language on the ballot and concerns that the money would eventually be directed elsewhere. Others had concerns about the dwindling supply of lottery money directed to schools.

"There are some issues we've identified that we need to work on to make sure we're pulling in the same direction," he said.

County Commissioners Chairman Michael Page said he was "delighted" that the education sales tax referendum passed.

"These resources will help us a lot in terms of saving teachers and providing opportunities at Durham Tech for our citizens to get scholarships to further their education," he said. "I think that we will continue to make our school system one of the best school systems around."

Revenue from the tax will be split into four pots: 67.12 percent to save the jobs of 150 public school teachers and school-level personnel; 21.74 percent for debt service on DPS capital projects; 8.97 percent to support Durham Tech scholarships; and 2.17 percent to support the Partnership's Transition to Kindergarten initiative.

Toler said he's thankful for the "incredible leadership" of his co-chair on the education sales tax committee, Meredythe Holmes, and for the support of a number of small businesses and the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce – particularly President Casey Steinbacher.

"I think it was to voters' credit in Durham County" that the measure passed, he said. "They were able to focus on what we need to continue to be great. One of the challenges that any community has is finding ways, when you've have success as our region has with the Research Triangle Park, to stay on top. ... We had been kind of resting on our laurels for a number of years and were able to kind of step it up."