

# Land tax vote rescinded, push on for local DMV

## Levy splits board

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A lousy 0 and 16 record for the land transfer tax, and a looming recession, convinced a majority of the Pamlico County Commissioners on Monday to rescind a referendum on the issue, originally scheduled for the May 6 primary.

In August, Commissioner Jimmy Spain was the lone holdout when the rest of the board OK'd placing the new levy on the ballot, a process authorized by the General Assembly last summer as part of the state's Medicaid relief legislation.

Since then, the tax -- which would allow a county to collect four-tenths of a percent from the proceeds of almost all land sales -- has been roundly defeated by the electorates of 16 different counties.

After fellow board members Carl Ollison, Roy Brinson Sr., and Chairman Doug Brinson joined him in reversing the decision, Spain could not resist a good-natured swipe at his new allies.

"I would just like to stay that I am the only one who has been consistently against this tax," he joked.

During a break from the board's multi-topic, all-day workshop, Ollison gently protested. He stressed his previous vote for a referendum should never have been construed as support for the tax.

Commissioner Paul Delamar III joined colleagues Christine Mele and Ann Holton. The three wanted to stick with the referendum.

"We need another tool in our (financial) toolbox," he argued. "History says that the ones who have the money to buy the radio and TV ads (against the tax) are the ones who got their way. I, for one, would like

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to see the people have a vote on this."

But Ollison countered that the county had missed a window of opportunity.

"Now we are in a recession," he said. "People are going to need to sell property to bail themselves out. At one time, the tax could have brought in some good money, but now the flipping is over -- because the real estate boom is over."

Roy Brinson hinted the commissioners should apply any and all proceeds to lower property tax rates.

Without such an assurance, any referendum would be an exercise in futility, he predicted.

"I don't hear anyone wanting to commit to lowering the property tax rate by 5 cents," he said. "If we put it out right now to the voters, it will definitely be defeated."

Immediately after the split vote, Delamar offered a fallback. He suggested county citizens should get an up-or-

down vote on a quarter-cent sales tax, which the General Assembly authorized as a more palatable alternative to the land transfer tax.

"This is one that has actually passed in other counties," he explained. "It gives us some other tool besides the property tax."

Holton volunteered a second to Delamar's motion. She reminded the commissioners that "you would have to spend \$10,000 to experience a \$25 tax impact, and the sales tax does not apply to vehicles or to food."

But this time -- having received optimistic revenue forecasts for the current fiscal year from county Finance Office Jim Philyaw -- an even bigger majority surfaced.

Delamar and Holton found themselves on a very short end of the stick -- as Mele sided with the original four to defeat any future vote on a sales tax increase.

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