

February 27, 2018

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee,

I'm Carolyn Blow. I thank you for allowing me to address you in support of HB 488.

We citizens have the privilege of voting directly for funding local services. Therefore, I am grateful for the opportunity that with HB 488 you can clarify the language with standardized terms and clearly stated taxes on all election notices and ballots for property taxes.

Before I go on, I do want to say that I am not against taxes. They are necessary for appropriate government services. I am for fairness and clarity in seeking funds from the public.

Today I will limit further comments to the worst offenders of fairness and clarity. They are the three kinds of replacement levies: "replacement," "replacement and increase," and "replacement and decrease" levies. All three are used to increase a tax, but of the three, only the replacement and increase ballot gives a hint of a tax increase, and even it includes a hidden tax in the "replacement" part. The so-called replacement and decrease levy almost always *increases* a tax, despite the overwhelming triple declaration on the ballot that implies it is for a tax *decrease*.

Some officials, lobbyists and legislators have indicated to me that replacement levies would fail if the public were told the truth. Two legislators in particular did not want to change the ballot language because, they said, their pet local taxing entity "need[s] the money." What an admission! Thankfully, I have not seen that outward attitude among other legislators with whom I've spoken; rather, most want to be fair with voters and taxpayers and fix the problem.

In their effort to be sure to get their levies passed, several local officials have said – but have never said in what way – that I was misleading the public when I had explained that these levies would produce an increase in tax. A few others have acknowledged that I was right, but privately.

The officials, lobbyists and few legislators who obviously do not want to change the ballot wording have nearly all in chorus said not to change the ballot

language but “just educate the public.” Here’s what educating the public looks like with replacement levies:

Replacement levy promotional materials, articles, letters to the editor and speeches by officials and other levy proponents have repeatedly used the following actual or similar false and/or misleading phrases to describe replacement levies: “no increase in millage” (true but misleading, always in the first paragraph), “a reduction in millage” (true but misleading, always in the first paragraph), “no increase in tax,” “the levy will not raise taxes,” “this levy was first voted in [year],” “you’ve been voting for this levy for [...] years,” “not a new tax,” “it’s a renewal,” and “if renewed this time around, this replacement levy....” Obviously, these are all used to make people think replacements are renewals and/or would not raise taxes. I have heard or read one or more of these or like “educational” phrases with just about every replacement levy promotion, and often there is no explanation anywhere in the ad, writing or speech that the levy would produce a tax increase.

When the voter sees the current ballot, who or what is he to believe? Even with passage of this bill, I have no doubt that levies will often be promoted with the same false and/or misleading phrases, but at least the truth will be on the ballot. Granted, compared to some years back, some levy promoters have recently been a little more often factual about a levy – although it’s often after the “no increase in millage” assurance at the beginning.

For those who say to keep the current deceptive language and just “educate” the public, I say, wouldn’t it make more sense to correct the language and then educate about the corrected language, if necessary? I don’t think it would be necessary because the new language is educational.

Let’s look at some supporting evidence for what I’ve said.

I trust that you see the need for more transparency in property tax issues. I respectfully ask you to seriously consider voting for HB 488.

Thank you for your attention. I’m willing to answer any questions you might have.

Respectfully submitted,

Carolyn J. Blow