

https://thebrunswicknews.com/news/local_news/splost-2021-referendum-fails/article_16d6fdca-84eb-5e84-8c56-2d7b439fb409.html

SPLOST 2021 referendum fails

By TAYLOR COOPER tcooper@thebrunswicknews.com

Mar 17, 2021



Campaign signs for the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax 2021 referendum stand near the entrance to Howard Coffin Park on Tuesday. Also on the ballot was a referendum to determine whether a SPLOST VI and V city of Brunswick project, the Oglethorpe Conference Center, was infeasible.

Taylor Cooper/The Brunswick News

Voters in Glynn County did not approve Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax 2021 on Tuesday.

The No votes led the Yes votes by a narrow margin of 53.54 percent to 46.46 percent.

A total of 6,845 votes were cast on the referendum, with 3,180 in favor and 3,665 against.



The second referendum on the ballot – to declare the Oglethorpe Conference Center, a SPLOST IV and V project, infeasible – passed with a much wider margin at 62.77 percent voting in favor and 37.23 percent voting against.

Out of the 6,822 total votes on that referendum, 4,282 voted for and 2,540 voted against.

Elections and Registration Supervisor Chris Channell with the Glynn County Board of Elections said only a handful of provision ballots remained after election night – not enough to sway either vote.

The Glynn County Commission, the city of Brunswick, Brunswick-Glynn County Joint Water and Sewer Commission and Jekyll Island Authority stood to gain as much as \$68.5 million from the 1 percent sales tax for infrastructure and capital projects and purchases.

When asked for comment, local officials were all of a similar disposition – disappointed.

“I would say that the citizens have spoken their will for District 2,” said county commissioner Cap Fendig. “I make no apologies for the projects that were offered up. During the campaign, those projects were supported and they turned out to be expensive and controversial, but at some time in the future, those projects will come to pass. The sad thing is it’s going to cost a whole bunch more.”

Fendig believed traffic issues, and water and sewer infrastructure on St. Simons Island will continue to worsen now that the SPLOST 2021 projects won’t get done in the near term.

The county has strong reserves, but commissioner Bill Brunson said the money coming from the average 3.2 million tourists that visit the area every year would have been a boon for the area, especially in the light of the post-COVID-19 boom he expects.

“I hate it, I really do,” Brunson said. “I think it’s unfortunate that it didn’t pass. We’ll just have to regroup and see how we go forward. Fortunately, the county’s in good financial shape, but this could have been some money we used for some significant projects that won’t happen right now.”

At-large commissioner David O’Quinn said the county will regroup and get to work on other issues, but expressed concern that SPLOST continues to be an unreliable funding source for Glynn County when other communities use it to great effect.

“I think the people have spoken,” O’Quinn said. “We’ll get up tomorrow and go back to work. We’ll have to figure out how to streamline government, finish the rest of the SPLOST (2016) projects and move on.”

The city of Brunswick will adjust its expectations accordingly now that SPLOST 2021 has failed at the ballot box, said Mayor Cornell Harvey. He was greatly disappointed, as much of the city’s cut would have gone toward much-needed infrastructure in Brunswick’s inner city.

“We’ll have to live with the decision that the community made,” Harvey said. “Some of the items we listed on our list will have to be put on the back-burner until we can get the funds to complete them. I’m sorry to hear that the community did not have the confidence in our ability to do these projects like I thought they had.”

On a more positive note, the passage of the second referendum will free up the Oglethorpe block in downtown Brunswick for some other form of development.

“That’s one thing we can get off our books and do something with that block,” Harvey said.

Members of each of the government agencies went to civic groups to pitch their proposal and look for support, but laws banning government spending on SPLOST advocacy tied their hands. The OneGlynn political action committee offers some support, including advertising purchases, but not enough to change the tide of voter sentiment.

Those in opposition similarly ran ads in print, radio and outdoor advertising calling on the public to oppose SPLOST.

The tax faced opposition from several sources, including the Glynn Environmental Coalition, which Executive Director Rachael Thompson said did not feel enough was being dedicated to the task of combating sea-level rise and resiliency efforts, and Citizens for St. Simons Island and Sea Island, which

conducted multiple town hall meetings to discuss with citizens the downsides of SPLOST 2021 and the failures of past SPLOST taxes.

The county must wait a year before bringing another SPLOST referendum, meaning the next one could be on the ballot in November 2022.

Taylor Cooper