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## SPLOST opponents weigh in on referendum's defeat

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Opponents of the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax 2021 say city and county commissions can blame themselves for its defeat in Tuesday's referendum.

They said the commissions simply took the wrong approach to the penny sales tax.

Representing an environmentalist viewpoint, Glynn Environmental Coalition Executive Director Rachael Thompson said GEC wanted to see more capital and infrastructure projects on the SPLOST 2021 list that addressed sea-level rise and coastal resiliency. That was one of three reasons the coalition stepped in to voice opposition to the tax. Another was public input. Thompson said none of the government agencies that stood to gain from the revenue gave the public any true opportunities to influence the projects list.

A total of 6,851 votes were cast, 3,180 in favor of the tax and 3,665 against it. The No votes led the Yes votes by a narrow margin of 53.5 percent to 46.5 percent.

Local government agencies proposed implementing the 1 percent sales tax for three years, which would have generated \$68.5 million to split among the county, city of Brunswick, Brunswick-Glynn County Joint Water and Sewer Commission and Jekyll Island Authority for infrastructure and capital

projects.

“As much as we were opposed to the SPLOST we know with the vote ‘no’ there are some projects that won’t get completed,” Thompson said. “There were some in the city and water and sewer that were worthy projects.

“To say we’re excited, I don’t think that’s an appropriate response.”

Next time around – the soonest which would be the 2022 general election – she recommends the county commission, in particular, give the public multiple chances to weigh in on proposed projects and to have a say in the final list.

She said a third-party traffic study on the intersection of Sea Island and Frederica roads suggests congestion issues could be relieved by tweaking the traffic lights. County commissioners included \$6 million in SPLOST 2021 for that intersection.

While the projects list did not specify what would be done with the intersection, Commissioner Cap Fendig, who represents St. Simons Island, has said on multiple occasions that a roundabout is the answer.

“That intersection might not even need a roundabout, but we haven’t seen them try (an alternative) yet,” Thompson said.

One might even say the prospect of a roundabout at that intersection was a major turn-off for voters.

As was the case during early voting, voters on St. Simons Island appear to have been the determining factor in the referendum. Of the 6,851 ballots cast, 3,602 were cast at one of the four St. Simons Island precincts – 1,577 in favor and 2,024 against.

St. Simons Island resident Julian Smith believes that’s probably for the best.

Smith has put a lot of time and money into opposing certain county initiatives, including SPLOST 2016 and 2021. He put over \$20,000 into advertisements against the 2016 tax, which ultimately passed. Much less went into this one, \$5,071, but it worked.

“Had they had SPLOST 2021 pass muster by the voters, then the county commission would have had a real fight on its hands for the next couple of years because they were committing themselves to spending a whole lot of money for the (Glynn County) Courthouse extension (and) four-laning Glynco Parkway,” Smith said.

The county commission included \$2 million in SPLOST 2021 for the planning phase of each project. Per SPLOST law, if the county embarked on the projects using money from the sales tax, it would have been legally obligated to finish them whether a subsequent SPLOST passed or not.

Like Thompson, Smith had reservations about plans for the intersection on Frederica and Sea Island roads. The project list was vague, allocating \$6 million to “access and right of way improvements at the intersection of Frederica Road and Sea Island road.”

That umbrella is broad enough that the county might have been obligating more money than it had there as well.

“There is legal costs, there is land acquisition, there is design, no telling how much it was going to cost,” Smith said. “This is a very rushed job. I will support a good SPLOST, but a good SPLOST is not going to have luxury projects only wanted by the tourism industry.”

The county is not really listening to what residents want, he said, and refusing to see great opportunities to improve the community outside the tourism box.

“The county commission has got to listen, they’ve got to talk to the planning commissions about what is really needed, and I won’t support a SPLOST that has all kinds of pork barrel and luxury items,” Smith said.

Were they in the same room, fellow island resident George Ragsdale would have agreed.

Through Citizens for St. Simons Island and Sea Island, he organized three town hall meetings to give the public exposure to some of the problems raised regarding SPLOST 2021. Among them were similar concerns about the Frederica-Sea Island intersection and a lack of transparency and public input.

The county’s project list is not descriptive enough across the board, he said, leaving citizens to wonder what form some of them might take. Cost estimates are guesses at best, which led to some high-profile overruns in SPLOST 2016 projects, and the county has no one dedicated to keeping track of the task full-time.

Give the public a greater voice and address these concerns, and Ragsdale said the commissioners might have a better chance in 2022.

“This should be a mandate for the commissioners that citizens want to be involved in what’s going on,” Ragsdale said. “... It’s an opportunity that the commissioners have now to address the concerns that were raised. They’ve got plenty of time to do that before they can float another SPLOST.”

County commissioners aren’t entirely to blame. SPLOST law allows the county to be fast and loose with SPLOST creation and management, he said. Many other communities in Georgia make it work by going above and beyond what the law requires in management and in public involvement, however, Ragsdale explained.

Complaints from the public aren’t unique to St. Simons Island and they don’t all revolve around the island and environmental issues.

Bobby Henderson, a co-founder of A Better Glynn, said the tax would not have benefited those who most need it.

“We have areas that have great need that are getting no attention, particularly the Arco and Dock Junction areas,” Henderson said. “One has high traffic and high possibility of economic development. With a little bit of site cleanup, we really have an opportunity to make it more viable for people coming in, which ultimately benefits the citizens.

“Those areas aren’t even given consideration in the SPLOST while St. Simons gets its 930th roundabout and drainage projects where there’s no complaints about that.”

The SPLOST projects city residents benefit from aren’t always what they’re cracked up to be, he continued. The reconstruction of L Street between Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and U.S. 17 went well past its original deadline, came in well over budget and did not completely resolve drainage problems in neighborhoods along the thoroughfare, Henderson said.

“I think people were not satisfied with the process,” Henderson said. “They feel it was rushed and people still had some angst about the 2016 SPLOST, how that money was allocated and spent and how some has not been spent.”

Until Glynn County puts money into planning on projects before SPLOST passes and until it opens the project selection process up to the public, Henderson said he can’t support it.

County and city officials who supported the sales tax said they were disappointed in the outcome of the vote.

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 62.8 percent voting in favor and 37.2 percent voting against.

Out of the 6,822 people who voted in that referendum, 4,282 voted for and 2,540 voted against it.

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