

Melbourne endorses half-cent sales tax road referendum



Rick Neale, FLORIDA TODAY 8:38 a.m. EDT August 31, 2015



(Photo: File)

MELBOURNE — The city has joined its larger neighbor to the south, Palm Bay, in supporting a half-cent sales tax referendum to repair gaping potholes, cracking asphalt and rutted roadways.

Tuesday, the Melbourne City Council unanimously moved to endorse the referendum. Staffers will next prepare a resolution asking the Brevard County Commission to place the question on the November 2016 presidential-election ballot.

"I can go ahead and support this, because it's not us sitting up here deciding if there's a tax increase or not. It's the voters. This is the voters' decision. And that's all that we're putting out there," Councilwoman Debbie

Thomas said.

"You all decide: If you want it, you vote for it. If you don't, you don't," Thomas said.



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The Palm Bay City Council approved a similar resolution Aug. 6. Councilman Tres Holton, who introduced the idea, addressed his Melbourne counterparts Tuesday from the public-comment podium.

"This resolution to ask the county commission is not an endorsement. It doesn't oppose. It simply gives the opportunity for the constituents that are out there to weigh in such an important issue," he said.

Holton said he contacted Florida Department of Revenue and learned the half-cent infrastructure tax would generate \$17.5 million per year for unincorporated Brevard County, or \$263 million over the referendum's 15-year lifespan. Palm Bay would collect \$4.5 million per year, or a total of \$68 million. Melbourne would collect \$3.3 million per year, or a total of \$50 million.

"Keep in mind: It's always pay me now or pay me later. The more the road deteriorates, the more costly it is to reconstruct," he said.

Melbourne's unfunded road-repair bill clocks in at \$32 million, said Cheryl Mall, city spokeswoman.

Last November, voters approved a Brevard Public Schools half-cent sales tax by a 58 percent "yes" margin. The tax took effect Jan. 1. Collections will last six years, increasing the county sales tax from 6 percent to 6.5 percent. Revenues will pay for upgrades to school buildings, security and technology.



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Melbourne Councilman Dan Porsi said he finds a gasoline tax, financed in part by tourists and Interstate 95 commuters, "more palatable." He worried that the road-repair referendum would increase Brevard's sales tax from 6.5 percent to 7 percent.

"I agree it's needed. I don't know. It's rough. Now it (would be) 7 percent. You know, in another two years, it'll be 7.5 percent, 8 percent," Porsi said.

Melbourne City Manager Mike McNees encouraged council members to publicly support the referendum, much like school board members did. He said roads are "much more front-of-mind to everyday voters" than school infrastructure needs.

It's going to go out to the voters. And I think that's fair. Let the voters decide. But we do need to fund our roads," Melbourne Mayor Kathy Meehan said.

Tuesday, the Indian Harbour Beach City Council also directed staffers to prepare a resolution supporting Palm Bay's proposal. Asked for his thoughts on the ballot question, Indian Harbour Beach City Manager Mark Ryan said it was "too early to tell."

"Lots of unknowns. We don't know what the restrictions are on use of the dollars, and we don't know how many dollars would be distributed. Too early to tell," Ryan said.

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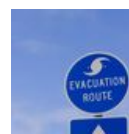
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