

Our Opinion: Pass the sales tax

Sales tax increases to support public schools have had an unblemished record in recent years in Guilford County. They never pass.

Despite the nobility of the cause and the tiny cost to individual taxpayers they've flamed out at the polls, even when they've had bipartisan support.

Six times in a row.

We keep trying. We keep falling short. A sales tax for schools failed in 2020 and 2022, even as voters did pass \$1.7 billion in bonds for school construction.

It wasn't close.

The sales tax is on the ballot again this year. And the pitch for it hasn't changed. For a tiny investment from individual taxpayers — one quarter of one cent — there's the promise of a big payoff, an estimated \$25 million per year.

If only we'll say yes.

Guilford County is conspicuous in its predilection to say no. Forty-six counties in North Carolina have approved the quarter-cent increase for schools, including Forsyth and Rockingham counties.

In 2020, voters in Forsyth County said yes to quarter-cent sales tax to supplement pay increases for teachers and support staff in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools. Two years later, Guilford said no. Again.

Here's why voters here should reconsider.

The best and most important reason to say yes is the cause: more competitive salaries for teachers and school support staff. North Carolina ranks 42nd in the nation in average starting pay for its public school teachers (\$40,136) and 38th in average pay overall (\$56,559). This state trails Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee in starting teacher pay. Teachers in Alabama make significantly higher starting salaries (\$60,441 annually) than in North Carolina. Even the poorest state in the Union, Mississippi, offers higher starting pay.

The closer to home, the worse the numbers look.

Even within the state teachers in Guilford County receive smaller local supplemental pay than teachers in Forsyth, Wake, Mecklenburg and Durham counties. As the News & Record's Kevin Griffin reported Tuesday, that gap ranges from 30.5% versus Wake to 7.3% versus Forsyth. This is unacceptable.

One beauty of the proposed sales tax increase is its economy of scale. A quarter-cent sales tax increase amounts to only an additional 5 cents per \$20 purchase, or 25 cents per \$100 purchase.

Another plus is that the tax would not apply to purchases of necessities such as gasoline, prescription drugs and groceries.

Yet another is that an estimated 40% the revenue would come from visitors to the county. Guilford County ranks fifth in the state in tourism revenue. People come here for basketball games at First Horizon Coliseum, touring performances at the Tanger Center, swim meets at the Greensboro Aquatic Center, the latest attractions at the Greensboro Science Center and N.C. A&T's homecoming week (to name only a few) and spend substantial money here.

For what we'd get, what we would give seems more than worth the investment: higher pay for teachers, cafeteria workers, school bus drivers and custodians, as well as a better chance compete for the best and brightest young educators and to retain veteran teachers.

As for critics who argue that it's the legislature that should be stepping up with more state funding for public schools, not local taxpayers, they're right. This legislature can find another \$463 million to fund vouchers for private schools even as it shortchanges public education.

(And we should address that problem elsewhere on the ballot when we choose our legislators.)

Another argument against the sales tax increase is that it's regressive — in other words, the poorest among us would bear a greater added tax burden than the richest.

And if the cost were higher than a fraction of every cent, we'd say no.

Instead, we urge voters (finally) to say yes to the sales tax for schools. And make the seventh time the charm.

News & Record Editorial