

Guest commentary: Tax referendum offers too little, too soon for Florida

CHRIS STRATON, Special to the Daily News
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Vote no and give up \$140? Yes! The League of Women Voters of Collier County asks you to do just that. That \$140 is the estimated average annual savings to a resident of Collier County if the property tax referendum passes on Jan. 29.

Doesn't everyone like to save money? Of course, but this property-tax constitutional amendment is not a plan that the League of Women Voters supports. All this plan does is provide a little bit of tax relief; it does not address Florida's need for comprehensive tax reform. We hope that once you consider the pros and cons of this proposal, you will agree with us and vote no.

The proposal recommends changes to the state Constitution relating to property taxation. With respect to homestead property, this proposal increases the homestead exemption (except for school district taxes) and allows homestead property owners to transfer up to \$500,000 of their Save Our Homes benefits to their next homestead.

With respect to nonhomestead property, this revision provides a \$25,000 exemption for tangible personal property and limits assessment increases for specified nonhomestead real property except for school district taxes.

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Reasons to vote no

-- Let the Florida Taxation and Budget Review Commission complete its comprehensive review of all taxes (see below).

-- Cities and counties will lose

\$9.6 billion in tax money over the next five years.

-- Public schools will lose \$2.8 billion in tax money over the next five years.

-- Making Save Our Homes portable extends the present inequality in property tax assessments between homestead owners and owners of nonhomestead property.

-- The tax breaks will apply to all homeowners, even those who can afford to pay.

-- Counties may raise developer impact fees or other taxes or fees to pay for cuts in property taxes.

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Reasons to vote yes

-- Adds a new \$25,000 homestead exemption applicable only to county property taxes (not school taxes).

-- Allows homestead property owners to apply up to \$500,000 in existing Save Our Homes tax savings to a new homestead.

-- Provides businesses with a new \$25,000 tax exemption on tangible personal property.

-- Limits county property tax assessment increases on nonhomestead real property to 10 percent per year (not applicable to school taxes).

-- May help stimulate sales of real property by allowing homestead property owners to transfer Save Our Homes tax savings to a new homestead. Of course, you have to sell your old house first.

This is the second property tax proposal from the Florida Legislature in recent months. The first proposal was challenged in court, and has been withdrawn. Meanwhile, a 30-member Taxation and Budget Reform Commission appointed by the governor and the leaders of the Legislature as required every 20 years by the state Constitution is currently examining the budgetary process, revenue needs and expenditure processes of the state. Members are analyzing Florida's tax structure as well as governmental productivity and efficiency. The commission is also reviewing policy as it relates to the ability of state and local governments to tax and adequately fund governmental operations. Their recommendations are due in May, in time to be placed on the November ballot.

Current proposals under consideration by the commission include the repeal of exemptions and exclusions from sales tax and the use of those new sources of revenue to replace revenues from ad valorem (property) taxes as a source of funding for education.

Another proposal under consideration addresses the portability of the Save Our Homes benefit. In fact, this commission is examining every idea embodied in the Jan. 29 referendum. But unlike the Florida Legislature, this commission is taking a comprehensive look at both taxes and revenue at the state and local government levels.

Every registered voter in Florida, regardless of party affiliation, can vote on this issue. We hope you will vote no. But regardless of how you vote, we urge you to vote. Don't let someone else decide.

In Collier you may vote on Jan. 29 at your local precinct; in early voting from Jan. 14-26; or by mail by calling 252-8450 or going to www.colliervotes.com. Early voting is open 10:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. at the Supervisor of Elections Office, Naples City Hall, Library Headquarters on Orange Blossom, Golden Gate Library, Marco Island Library, Immokalee Library and Everglades City Hall.

Contact the Supervisor of Elections office at 252-8450 or call the League of Women Voters of Collier County at 263-4656 for more information.

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Editor's note: In Lee County, early voting sites are: Lee County Supervisor of Elections main office, 2480 Thompson St., Fort Myers; Election Center branch office, 13180 S. Cleveland Ave., Fort Myers (across from Bell Tower Shops behind Robb & Stucky); the Supervisor of Elections Bonita Springs branch office, 24951 Old 41 Road, Suite No. 10, Bonita Springs; East County Library, Lehigh Acres; and Cape Coral branch office, 1031 S.E. Ninth Place S.W., No. 3, Cape Coral. All sites are open Mondays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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