

NEWS

UPDATE: Fargo approves flood protection tax

FARGO -- Cass County will begin collecting money April 1 for a proposed Red River diversion and other flood projection projects after county voters resoundingly approved a half-cent sales tax on Tuesday.

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FARGO -- Cass County will begin collecting money April 1 for a proposed Red River diversion and other flood projection projects after county voters resoundingly approved a half-cent sales tax on Tuesday.

In complete but unofficial results, the tally was 64 percent, or 30,496, in favor of the tax and 36 percent, or 17,117, against it.

County Commission Chairman Darrell Vanyo said the margin of approval was slightly lower than what he expected, but still "a vote of confidence."

"I'm very pleased," he said.

The 20-year tax needed a simple majority to pass.

Vanyo said the tax will provide a "critical" piece for the diversion project by matching Fargo's contribution dollar for dollar while also giving the county some control over the project's funding and additional money for other flood-related projects.

Having the tax in place when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers finishes its feasibility study on the diversion - expected to happen in November 2011 - will "serve us very well" in winning federal support for the project, Vanyo said.

"Contrary to what some people think, this is a major milestone," he said. "We're in a position to hit the ground running rather than going back to people to find a funding source, so I think it's very exciting."

The county tax, which will raise an estimated \$220 million over its lifespan, was endorsed by the Fargo Moorhead West Fargo Chamber of Commerce and four of the five Fargo city commissioners.

City Commissioner Dave Piepkorn opposed it, objecting to what he called "really vague" ballot language - a line that referred to the money being used for a diversion "and other flood control measures."

Former Fargo mayor Jon Lindgren co-chaired the No Blind Tax Committee that opposed the tax because there's no approved project to spend the money on.

Proponents, led by Vanyo, countered that there is a project: a 35,000-cubic-feet-per-second North Dakota diversion channel, endorsed as the locally preferred plan by leaders in Fargo, Moorhead and Cass and Clay counties.

Lindgren said he knew the group had an uphill battle, given the 90-percent voter approval of a Fargo half-cent sales tax for flood protection in June 2009 and the amount of money spent by proponents campaigning for the county tax.

"I still have the same concerns I've expressed all along," Lindgren said. "It's whether or not the project has the potential to proceed in a timely manner. It just seems like there's so many possible things that could go awry, that just I still think it's early for the tax. But the voters have decided, so I cannot argue with that."

Marvin Setness, who lives between the Red and Wild Rice rivers just south of Fargo, said he voted for the tax because "we just need something done."

"It's ridiculous, every other year, every year, you've still got to sandbag, taking kids out of school for weeks at a time," he said. "It's ridiculous that a city of this size can't get this done. If West Fargo can get it done, why can't Fargo?"

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