

Local

PN • SOUTH FLORIDA SUN-SENTINEL | WEDNESDAY | NOVEMBER 3, 2004 | SECTION B

SALES TAX REFERENDUM

Half-cent increase OK'd

Money to be used for new schools, and to replace older buildings

BY MARC FREEMAN
EDUCATION WRITER

Palm Beach County voters on Tuesday appeared to overwhelmingly pass a referendum to raise the sales tax by a

half-cent on the dollar for the next six years to build new public schools and replace older buildings.

The school district's victory comes after a campaign driven by strong busi-

ness community backing and public forgiveness of misspending from a 1986 property-tax referendum.

Thanks to the extra sales tax — it adds a quarter to a \$50 purchase of taxable items — officials say the system will avoid a “catastrophic” scenario of overcrowded schools, deteriorating campuses and even classes held year-round.

No organized opposition to the ballot question ever emerged, and it prevailed despite supporters' concerns that it could be ignored due to high-profile races on the ballot.

“The bricks and mortar is important for our kids, but what happens inside the classroom is most important,” Su-

■ TAX CONTINUES ON 6B

County voters approve raising sales tax by half-cent

■ TAX

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

perintendent Art Johnson said.

The half-percent tax, starting Jan. 1 and ending Dec. 31, 2010, is projected ultimately to raise an estimated \$560 million toward a \$1 billion construction program. The plan includes opening or starting work on 14 new schools and 26 replacement schools and classroom additions at 27 schools — all during the next five years.

Administrators say they had no choice but to pursue the ref-

erendum because the district is projected to fall far short of obtaining the needed money from loans, property taxes and state sources. The construction plan is so large due to the addition of about 5,000 new students each year, a schedule of modernizing campuses that are more than 35 years old, an anti-overcrowding policy and high construction costs.

Before embracing the half-cent tax, business leaders demanded and won a guarantee that a committee of citizens with no financial ties to the district would make sure the mon-

ey is spent as promised.

This strict oversight would “make sure it's done right,” assured radio and television ads sponsored by the Community and Education Partnership, a business-led political committee. As of Oct. 8, the group had collected \$507,675 in campaign donations from construction companies and other firms that do business with the district.

“We're just really excited because it does so many good things for the schools and the communities,” said Budd Kneip, committee chairman.

SCHOOL BOND ISSUE

99.0% of precincts reporting
Should a half-cent sales tax be added to build and modernize schools?

CANDIDATES	VOTES	PCT.
Yes	242,719	58.4 ✓
No	172,733	41.6

The half-cent tax will apply to purchases of retail goods, prepared foods, car repairs and more. But medicines, baby food and some groceries are exempt. Only the first \$5,000 of any single purchase is subject to the extra tax.

A family with a household

income of \$75,000 will pay an estimated \$679 in additional sales tax over six years, while a family with a \$25,000 income will pay \$342 more, according to the school district.

But business leaders pushed the sales tax, rather than an increase in property taxes, because tourists and other consumers would share up to 20 percent of the burden, and residents who rent also would pay.

Marc Freeman can be reached at mjfreeman@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6642.