

Officials: Combine levies on 1 ballot

By Barry M. Horstman
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Hoping to trim taxes by fundamentally changing how and when voters are asked to approve them, two top Hamilton County officials are proposing that all future special levies appear together on the same ballot.

Under the current system, more than \$200 million in special levies -- which fund programs from indigent and mental health care to parks and the zoo -- go before voters on a staggered basis, with no more than several appearing on the ballot at one time.

That piecemeal approach, Commissioner Phil Heimlich and Auditor Dusty Rhodes argue, undermines voters' ability to assess the cumulative effect that the year-by-year levies have on their pocketbook.

Consolidating all levies -- except for school measures, which are beyond the county's control -- on a single ballot would better enable voters to prioritize where their tax dollars go, the two said Monday. It also would likely reduce the overall level of taxation, they added, with the extra ballot competition giving levy proponents an incentive to ask for less, not more, money.

"Over the years, we have added levy after levy after levy," Rhodes told a downtown news conference at the County Administration Building. "We're being nibbled to death by ducks."

Others, however, warn that a ballot filled with up to nearly a dozen special levies could overwhelm voters, weakening campaigns' political dialogue by severely limiting the attention paid to the merits of individual issues. In addition, if voters are asked to weigh children's services against mental health care, or police cruiser computers against parks and museums, some worthy programs could be devastated, they said.

"If you lump all of these things together, you end up doing a disservice to the voters just because of the raw numbers," said Hamilton County Republican Party chairman Mike Barrett.

"You'd be asking people to absorb too much at once. There's a reason it's done the way it is now: to allow voters to look at a manageable number of candidates and issues. I think trying to do it all at once is a bad idea."

Gregg Hudson, president and CEO of the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, which next month is asking voters for a five-year, 0.4 mill levy that would cost the owner of a \$100,000 home about \$9.80 a year, worries that a levy-heavy ballot would make it difficult for proponents -- or opponents -- of his or other issues to capture an audience.

"I'd be concerned about our ability to get a quality message across in that very crowded sea," Hudson said.

Even if the county commissioners approve the idea, which is to go before the county for debate next week, levy proponents still could circulate petitions to qualify measures for the ballot. That, however, is a considerably more complicated, costly and time-consuming method than having the commissioners place a measure before voters.

Under Monday's proposal, the period covered by upcoming levies would be gradually reduced over the next few years so that all would come up for renewal in 2008. Beginning that year, all special levies would appear on the same ballot.

Republican Heimlich and Democrat Rhodes insist they are simply seeking to give voters the same latitude they have in other areas of their life, while at the same time making it simpler to determine which of the various competing public demands for their money are most deserving.

"When you go to Kroger's, you get to shop and compare," Heimlich said. "When you go to the ballot box, you ought to be able to shop and compare. -- Competition is good for everybody."

Whether by design or happenstance, the current system conceals the levies' running tab by generally putting only one or two ballot measures before voters at any given time, Rhodes noted. While most levies cost taxpayers only pennies a day -- senior services, for example, costs county residents 8 cents daily -- "those pennies add up" after multiple levies are approved over a four- or five-year election cycle, he added.

From 1991 to 2001, levy revenues in Hamilton County rose 80 percent to \$210 million, three times the rate of inflation, Heimlich said. If that trend continues unchecked through 2010, it will lead to a 215 percent increase to \$371 million.

"This kind of turns the whole process on its head," Rhodes said. "This is an idea that puts the taxpayer in charge as opposed to constantly nickel and diming them over a period of time. It makes the whole process a lot more accountable."

Some political activists, however, disagree.

Gene Beaupre, a former City Hall staffer who teaches political science at Xavier University, predicted that asking voters to wade through so many ballot issues in a single election would cause campaigns to degenerate into superficial contests in which many issues would receive, at best, cursory attention from voters and the news media alike.

"In the name of giving voters more choice, it in fact does the opposite," Beaupre said.

The proposal also poses considerable practical and logistical problems, said Tim Burke, co-chairman of the Hamilton County Democratic Party. Given the finite campaign resources -- financial and otherwise -- available, it simply is not feasible, Burke said, to wage so many campaigns simultaneously.

"The money won't be there, the volunteers won't be there," Burke said. "This whole effort seems intended to produce maximum confusion. It's not good politics and it's not good government."

If tax reduction is the objective, this is the wrong way to achieve it, GOP leader Barrett said.

"I'm not a big fan of taxes, either," Barrett said. "But there are basic things the government has to pay for."

While levy-supported programs such as the zoo, parks and museums might be considered discretionary, special levies also fund some of government's most essential services in areas such as mental health and children's care.

"Can you imagine the chaos if even half of those things lost?" said Chip Gerhardt, chairman of the Friends of the Zoo campaign.

Publication Date: 10-14-2003
