Focus Groups to Assess Support for a ¼ Cent Sales Tax for Public Safety and Infrastructure

Presentation of Findings
By ETC Institute
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Agenda

- Purpose
- Methodology
- Conclusions
- Findings
  - How funding for major county services should change
  - Importance of funding specific types of projects that could be included in a future sales tax
  - Willingness to support a sales tax
  - Preferred allocation for the tax
  - Preferred type and length of tax
  - Impact of other issues on support
- Recommendations
- Questions
To determine whether the County should continue to pursue plans to present voters with a proposal for a ¼ cent sales tax for public safety and infrastructure

To determine the types of projects and services that should be funded

To determine the preferred type of tax
Methodology

- A total of 20 residents participated in two focus groups
  - 12 people attended a meeting at the Turner Recreation Center on January 18
  - 8 people attended a meeting at the Reardon Center on January 19

- Participants were selected by the Mayor and County commissioners
  - Not a random sample
  - Participants were generally more involved in and more familiar with local governmental issues than the “average” resident

- The overall composition of the meetings reflected the diverse demographics of the County
  - 11 men
  - 9 women
  - 12 Whites
  - 5 African-Americans
  - 3 Hispanics
  - Age range of participants: 30–80 years
  - All commission districts were represented
Bottom Line Up Front: Conclusions...

- The County should move forward with plans to present voters with a ¼ cent sales tax for public safety and infrastructure

- The tax should include funding for
  - More specialty police officers (narcotics, SROs, etc.)
  - Curbs and sidewalks
  - Repairs to sanitary and storm sewers

- To the extent possible, infrastructure improvements should be completed in a coordinated manner that will help enhance the overall appearance/aesthetics of neighborhoods

- County should pursue a “dedicated” sales tax for 10–20 years
Findings:
How should funding for major county services change?
How Focus Group Participants Thought Funding for Major County Services Should Change

by number of respondents

- Street, Sidewalk, and Curb Maintenance: Should be INCREASED 19, Should Stay the SAME 1
- Police: Should be INCREASED 15, Should Stay the SAME 5
- Stormwater Improvements: Should be INCREASED 11, Should Stay the SAME 9
- Sewer improvements: Should be INCREASED 11, Should Stay the SAME 9
- Fire: Should be INCREASED 8, Should Stay the SAME 9, Should Be DECREASED 3

Source: ETC Institute 2010
Reasons Residents Thought Funding For Various Services Should Be Increased

- **Police:**
  - “We have had a high crime rate that has existed for a long time.”
  - “The community is growing and police coverage needs to grow proportionately.”
  - “We need more specialized officers, especially for narcotics.”
  - “We need more SROs at the schools.”

- **Fire:**
  - “The equipment and facilities are wearing out and it is a risk to the firemen.”
  - “Some areas of the County are not covered well.”
  - “We must keep up with additional growth in the County.”
Reasons Residents Thought Funding For Various Services Should Be Increased

- **Street and Road Maintenance**
  - “Bad sidewalks and curbs make it appear that no one cares about this part of town (State Avenue).”
  - “Sidewalks and streets are not maintained, grass is not mowed and there is too much trash.”

- **Stormwater Management/Flood Prevention:**
  - “The Argentine area has always had stormwater management problems.”
  - “The Federal government is asking cities to step up to the plate to update infrastructure, so we need to step up.”
  - “In some areas the infrastructure is 80 years old.”

- **Sewer improvements:**
  - “With just an average rain, sewers back up.”
  - “We have an aging infrastructure that needs to be repaired.”
Findings:
How important is it to fund specific programs and services that could be included in a future sales tax?
# How Important Focus Group Participants Thought It Was for the County to Increase Funding for Specific Projects/Services

by number of respondents

**Generally Supported**
- Curb and sidewalk improvements: 18
- Neighborhood street repairs: 17
- Police officers (specialty officers): 10
- Stormwater improvements: 10
- Major street repairs: 9
- Street lighting: 8
- Sanitary sewer expansion: 8
- Parks/recreational facilities: 6
- Sanitary sewer repairs: 5
- Stormwater system expansion: 5
- Bridge maintenance: 5

**Potentially Opposed**
- Police equipment/cars: 9
- Repairs to fire stations: 8
- Police training facilities: 4
- Fire equipment: 7
- Fire fighters: 6
- New fire stations: 3
- Fire training facilities: 6

**Source:** ETC Institute 2010
Findings:
Which projects and services would residents be most willing to have funded by a future sales tax?
Projects and Services that Focus Group Participants Would Support Most on a Future Sales Tax

by number of respondents who selected the item as one of their top three choices

- Curb and sidewalk improvements: 11
- Police officers (specialty officers): 0
- Stormwater improvements: 7
- Neighborhood street repairs: 6
- Sanitary sewer repairs: 5
- Fire fighters: 4
- Police equipment/cars: 3
- Parks/recreational facilities: 3
- Major street repairs: 2
- Stormwater system expansion: 2
- New fire stations: 2
- Street lighting: 1
- Sanitary sewer expansion: 1
- Bridge maintenance: 1
- Police training facilities: 1
- Fire equipment: 1
- Fire training facilities: 1
- Repairs to fire stations: 1

19 of 20 participants picked one of these items as one of their top 3 choices

Source: ETC Institute 2010
Findings:
How willing are residents to support a future sales tax?
Willingness of Focus Group Participants to Support a 1/4 Cent Sales Tax if it Included Funding for More Police Officers, Curbs/Sidewalks, and Storm/Sewer System Improvements

by percentage of respondents

- Very Willing: 12
- Somewhat Willing: 5
- Not Willing: 3

Source: ETC Institute 2010
Reasons Residents Were Not “Very Willing” to Support a Sales Tax

Those who were “somewhat willing” said:

- “I need to know how the sales tax would make us compare to other areas in the Metro so that shoppers will not be dissuaded from shopping here because of a higher sales tax.”
- “I need some assurances of accountability; how can we be sure they will actually do these projects.”
- “I need more information about the actual cost and specific projects that will be funded. I want to know that they are really needed and that we have tried other options.”

Those who were “not willing” said:

- “My community (northeast) has gotten nothing for all these years, I doubt it is going to change.”
- “Senior citizens on social security can’t afford more taxes; taxes are already too high.”
- “I have trust issues with the UG.”
Findings:
How would residents like to see funding for a future sales tax allocated?
How Focus Group Participants Would Allocate $100 from a ¼ Cent Sales Tax for Public Safety and Infrastructure

mean distribution for all respondents

- Curb and sidewalks: $20.67
- Police: $29.23
- Parks: $1.46
- Neighborhood streets: $8.98
- Repairs to Storm/sanitary sewers: $28.81
- More firemen: $10.86

Source: ETC Institute 2010
Findings:
What type of tax should the County present to voters?
Preferred Type: Dedicated

- 12 (60%) participants preferred a dedicated sales tax
- 8 (40%) preferred a general purpose tax
- Some participants were concerned about accountability
- 5 of the 12 participants who said they would support a dedicated sales tax would not support a general purpose sales tax
- All of those who supported a general purpose tax were also willing to support a dedicated tax
Findings:
How many years should the sales tax last?
Preferred Length for the Tax

- **Preferred Length: at least 10 years**
  - 3 participants would probably not support the tax
  - Of the remaining 17 people, 16 indicated that they would support a tax that lasted at least 10 years, assuming:
    - There were assurances that the tax would be used for the projects promised
  - 7 participants indicated that they preferred the 10-year time frame because it would hold the County accountable
    - They felt the tax would be renewed if the County did a good job implementing the tax and they were not sure that they would support a tax that lasted more than 10 years
  - 5 participants were concerned that 10 years was not enough time
    - But all of these people would still support the 10-year tax
Findings:
What Impact Would the State Sales Tax and Cigarette Tax Proposals Have on Support for the County Tax?
Impact of State Initiatives

- **State Sales Tax:**
  - Only 3 participants indicated that a 1% state sales tax would make them less supportive of the proposed County sales tax.
  - Most of the participants did not think the proposed state sales tax would affect their level of support.
  - 4 people suggested that the County implement its sales tax before the State sales tax just to be safe.

- **Cigarette Tax:**
  - None of the participants thought the proposed 55-cent per pack tax on cigarettes would make the less supportive of the County sales tax.
Closing Comments
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“Have there been other considerations for funding? Have we done our homework? Is this really needed?”

“Make sure that the sales tax goes to the issues as promised. Accountability is very very important.”

“Police and Fire need to be the main focus. I know we have other needs, but we need to be sure the community is safe.”

“I appreciate this kind of a process and respect my fellow participants.”

“I hope and pray that the UG listens to what the citizens have said, and especially these focus groups.”

“My bills are going up so I just can’t support any more tax increases. Tax increases are really hard on seniors.”

“With all the new things that are coming to this area, we should support tax for the betterment of our community.”

“We need to sell this to the people. Everything else has been tried.”
Recommendations
Recommendations…

- The County should move forward with plans to present voters with a ¼ cent sales tax for public safety and infrastructure.
- The tax should include funding for:
  - More specialty police officers (narcotics, SROs, etc.)
  - Curbs and sidewalks
  - Repairs to sanitary and storm sewers
- To the extent possible, infrastructure improvements should be completed in a coordinated manner that will help enhance the overall appearance/aesthetics of neighborhoods.
- County should pursue a “dedicated” sales tax for 10–20 years.
Other Issues to Address…

- County should not rely solely on the results of these focus groups to predict the likely outcome of the sales tax
  - Focus Groups are not a scientific sampling of the voting population
- County will need to do a good job educating the public about the need for the sales tax
  - The County will need to explain that other options have already been tried
- County will need to address issues about how the sales tax will affect the County’s competitiveness with other communities
  - Will the higher sales tax hurt local business?
Questions??

THANK YOU