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Jackson residents will vote on open-space tax issue

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Local residents will be asked in the November election whether they want to reduce the open-space tax rate from 3 cents to 2 cents per \$100 of assessed property value.

On Tuesday, the Township Council approved a resolution to have the public vote on the ballot question in November.

This will mark the fourth time in nine elections a question on the open-space trust fund will be on the ballot.

The council voted 4-0 in favor of the referendum, with council President Michael Kafton abstaining.

A "yes" vote will mean the open-space tax rate will remain at 3 cents. A "no" vote will be for the reduction of the rate to 2 cents.

Debate on the issue at Tuesday night's council meeting was often heated and lasted more than 90 minutes. The majority of those who attended endorsed the question.

"The question tonight is whether or not the council president and the council members give the people of this town credit for intelligence — or are you going to have to make a decision for them?" said resident Martin Spielman, 75.

Some questioned the need for an open-space trust fund.

"We don't need an open-space tax, theoretically, because the council in any point in time can use its capital-funding program to purchase land," said Paul Mayerowitz, 62, a catalyst behind the referendum question.

Of the \$900,000 collected for the open-space trust fund in 2008, 79 percent of that money went toward debt-service payments, according to the adopted 2009 municipal budget.

"Having an open-space trust fund takes the pressure off council," Mayerowitz said. "Because they have a ready pot of money to spend rather than making an important decision to tax the residents in a given year because it might affect their political future."

This year, \$2 million will be collected for the open-space trust fund — about \$1.1 million more than in 2008 due to the completion of a townwide revaluation.

Among the 70 people in attendance, some supported leaving the open-space tax alone.

"This is absolutely absurd," said Sean Giblin, a former committeeman. "Did we ask the county to equalize their (open-space) tax rate?"

Since 1997, the county has had a tax dedicated for conservation and farmland preservation.

Theresa Lettman, chairwoman of the Ocean County Land Trust Advisory Committee, said that once the ballot question is approved, residents should be educated on the ramifications of a cut to the open-space tax.

"Land is expensive, not cheap," Lettman said. "If we don't want development, we have to purchase land."

Lettman said that leaving the tax rate alone would generate more leverage for the municipality to make open-space acquisitions through grants and low-interest loans.

"Why not take advantage of that leverage?" Lettman asked.

The open-space trust fund was established after voters approved a nonbinding referendum question in 2001. The open-space tax rate was increased to 3 cents in 2004.

However, a ballot question to increase the tax rate to 4.5 cents was defeated three years ago.

It was also apparent the issue is a political lightning rod.

Mayor Mike Reina proposed the referendum question in June, but since then has not taken a clear position on cutting the open-space tax rate. He is running for re-election.

Meanwhile, Kafton, a candidate for mayor and strong proponent of the current open-space tax rate, abstained from voting on the resolution. It was the third different position Kafton has taken on the referendum issue since June.

Additional Facts

WHAT IT MEANS

If the open-space tax rate is reduced, residents who own a home valued at the township average of \$341,652 will see their annual overall municipal tax bill decrease by about \$34 in 2010. That would reduce the amount designated for the municipal open-space fund by more than \$550,000.