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Jackson officials say they'll vote against reducing open space tax rate

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All five Township Council members and Mayor Micheal Reina said that in the open space referendum Nov. 3 they will vote to keep the municipal open space tax rate at 3 cents rather than reducing it by a penny, to 2 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

The contentious issue of the open space tax has been a primary topic in town since Reina proposed the referendum in June. The referendum asks voters whether the tax rate to support purchases to preserve open space should be reduced to 2 cents from the current 3 cents.

Reina proposed the referendum after a recently completed townwide revaluation increased the assessed value of most homes in the municipality by more than double.

Council members made their voting intentions known after being pressed on the topic by resident Herb Blatt, 78, during the public portion of Tuesday's council meeting.

"This is a binding resolution," said Blatt. "And if the people vote one way and the township thinks it should be another way, it's just too bad."

Few issues this year have been as politically charged locally as the open space tax referendum.

For example, Reina's decision to vote against the open space tax reduction contradicts his prior position of supporting the measure. On his campaign Web site, mikereina.com, as recently as Monday the headline on the open space tax was "Mayor Reina seeks cuts in open space tax." That headline has since been changed.

At the council meeting, Reina said the referendum is an example of open government.

"You need to have a say of where the tax dollars go, not what someone up here dictates to you, like it's been done in the past," said Reina.

Moments later he said, "I am voting for the three cents to stay".

Likewise, Council President Michael J. Kafton, one of three interim mayoral candidates challenging Reina in next month's special election and an outspoken supporter of keeping the open space tax as is, publicly opposed a referendum in June.

Weeks later he supported the referendum before eventually abstaining from the council's vote on the issue. Council approved putting the referendum on the ballot by a 4-0 vote in August.

Councilwoman Ann M. Updegrave agreed with Reina that the main issue is to allow residents the opportunity to vote on tax issues.

"The fact of the matter is the most important thing about this entire scenario was that it will allow

residents to make their decision about (how) they feel and where they stand on open space," said Updegrave.

Currently, the municipal open space tax would generate about \$2 million for land acquisitions. A yes vote to cut the open space tax rate to 2 cents would result in about \$1.35 million being added to the municipal fund.

Approximately, \$740,000 of the fund is dedicated to debt service for prior land acquisitions.

"I think the open space fund is one of the mechanism we have to reduce residential development," said Councilman Howard S. Tilis, who is running to retain his seat next month. "I believe at a 3-cent rate we will leave more money available to buy open space to stop residential development."

Council members Roberta Rivere and Scott R. Martin also announced they would vote against the measure.
