



Tuesday, March 18, 2008

The Pledge not a local favorite

Most area towns were in favor of resolution against property taxes

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Voters in dozens of New Hampshire communities feel their property taxes are too high - and they've chosen to say the buck stops in Concord.

Residents in 53 towns, including 11 in the Monadnock Region, voted at town meetings this year to support a resolution calling property taxes in New Hampshire "unjust and unfair" and called on politicians to find a way to lower property-tax payments. The article was defeated in at least 24 towns.

Thirteen of the 14 towns to vote on the resolution last year passed it, including five in the Monadnock Region.

"Close to 100 communities have voted on it. And two out of three, basically, have passed it. We take that as a very positive statement by the people of New Hampshire that they want this property-tax crisis addressed by the state," said Paul J. Henle, executive director of the Granite State Fair Tax Coalition.

The Concord-based group, which drove the resolution's placement on town-meeting warrants in all 10 counties, is in the process of deciding how it will lobby state lawmakers.

In the early 1970s, Republican governor Meldrim Thompson ran on an anti-income tax platform and won three consecutive terms. Since then, many Granite State politicians have taken a pledge not to support an income or sales tax.

But the recent round of voting should tell the lawmakers in Concord that "The Pledge" is a thing of the past, Henle said.

"People are very worried about high property taxes," he said. "This should be addressed through taking a hard look at budgets, but we need to address it through all means possible. Alternatives to the property tax should be considered."

Voters in Acworth, Alstead, Bennington, Charlestown, Fitzwilliam, Jaffrey, Rindge, Sullivan, Surry, Walpole and Winchester all passed the resolution this month. The measure did not make it through in Chesterfield, Gilsum, Langdon or Richmond. Stoddard is one of a few towns in the state that will tackle the issue in May.

Marlborough and Roxbury were listed by Henle's organization as two of the communities voting on the resolution this year, but did not. Selectmen in Marlborough chose not to place it before voters because no residents came forward in support of the warrant article, and town officials in Roxbury said they had not heard about the issue from anyone.

The resolution passed last year in Hancock, Harrisville, Hinsdale, Peterborough and Westmoreland.

This year in Keene, school-district voters overwhelmingly supported the warrant article, 2,096 to 420, the first school district to do so.

"I knew there was going to be a ballot. How better to let the people have a voice?" said state Rep. J. Timothy Dunn, D-Keene, who worked to get the resolution on ballots in the western Monadnock Region. "I think the result was resounding. It tells me that the people in my

constituency want a change."

Because of "The Pledge," Dunn said, many state lawmakers have been handcuffed from solving or even talking about a solution to rising property-tax rates.

"We've got to get over that hump somehow so we can have the discussion," he said. "Whenever you talk about this, people immediately say you'll put in another tax but you won't lower the property tax. That's happened in other states, but this isn't other states. This is probably the most frugal state in the union."

Dunn has also spoken about the resolution with the Keene City Council's finance, organization and personnel committee.

"The city cannot do a thing about the state method of taxation, so it's simply a feel-good resolution that would let people in the Legislature know that we don't like the way the state is taxing for school expenses," said committee Chairman Cynthia C. Georgina.

"We can send the message to our delegation, but our delegation already knows how we feel, and they feel the same way," she said. "It's the guys in the other part of the state who keep taking 'The Pledge.' "

But nobody is forced into taking "The Pledge," said Michael G. Biondo, chairman of the N.H. Advantage Coalition, a group that advocates for fewer taxes and less government spending. The Manchester-based organization opposes the anti-pledge resolution and says it is an effort to bring an income or sales tax to the state.

"The only thing that's making (lawmakers) say they're against the income tax is because people don't want one," Biondo said. "What they're going to have to do is change the hearts and minds of the voters, not go and put warrant articles on in a small number of communities.

"We don't argue at all that people want their property taxes lower," he said. "This was a masked attempt at trying to tell voters that the property taxes are going to go down. State after state that has passed income taxes, their property taxes don't go down. They go down for a short period of time and go back up again."

The key is to control government spending, something voters in numerous communities did by turning down large projects and other expenditures at town meetings this year, Biondo said.

The N.H. Advantage Coalition is working to get measures to control spending on local ballots in the November elections.

The Granite State Fair Tax Coalition, meanwhile, wants people to continue to talk about property taxes until something is done about them.

"It would be great to get it addressed in the next session of the Legislature," Henle said. "We've got to deal with this, and we've got to deal with it now."

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