

Vote YES for E-SPLOST

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – March 10, 2013

For every dollar you or I spend shopping in Newton County, we toss a penny into the jar (figuratively) for Newton County schools. Every visitor to our county does the same. We've been doing it since 1999, and come March 19, we'll decide if we want to continue that practice through 2019.

I'm referring, of course, to the referendum for a 2015-2019 Education Special Local Option Sales Tax (E-SPLOST) in Newton County, which would extend the current E-SPLOST approved in 2007 for collection between 2009 and 2014. Georgia law allows local school districts, with voter approval, to collect a 1% sales tax to fund capital projects and/or debt service. E-SPLOST cannot be used for normal operating expenses like salaries, supplies, or routine maintenance.

As a fellow citizen, I'm urging you to vote YES in the special election on March 19 or during early voting through March 15. Please encourage friends and neighbors to do the same.

My wife and I don't have children, so we will never directly use the services of our school system. But, our lives are impacted greatly by the quality of our education system. I gladly pay the current penny sales tax, and I buy local so my money will benefit education in my community and not someone else's. I feel the same way about my property taxes that go to the school system. We also give to education-related local non-profits like the Washington Street Community Center and the Newton Education Foundation, because there is no more important investment we make as a community than the development of our young people.

The long-term payback of better educated, more rounded, career-ready young people equipped to be productive members of society is reason enough. But, there are significant short-term implications as well. Businesses evaluating communities for relocation or expansion consider the quality of the local school system a critical element of the decision making process. They choose places with schools that appeal to employees they need to retain through the relocation and that are capable of sustaining an educated workforce. Communities with a track record of investing in education stand out. Those choosing not to invest stand out too -- but, not in a good way.

There is no good time to back away from investing in education. But, there could hardly be a worse one than now.

Last decade, Newton's population grew at a nation-leading rate of 61%, as school enrollment surged 73%. Meanwhile, starting in 2008, the "Great Recession" drove property values sharply down, causing a 34% erosion of Newton County's property tax digest. Because state law prohibits a millage rate higher than 20 mills, the school system

could not raise the rate, resulting in a \$19 million decline in ad valorem tax revenues. As a result, the system has been forced to cut spending by \$26 million. Either circumstance alone – the surging student population or falling revenues – would greatly challenge any school system. But, together they were the perfect storm for a crisis. We are weathering the storm and making progress, but the strain has been considerable.

I mean no disrespect to those opposing the E-SPLOST, but a NO vote would be foolish under present conditions. It would be a self-inflicted wound on a community already struggling to deal with effects of events beyond our control. Sadly, self-inflicted wounds seem to be the order of the day in Washington, but, we can't afford to act that way down here. We're better than that.

The next E-SPLOST will generate an estimated \$57 million between 2015 and 2019, with \$30 million going towards debt service. That amount is referred to as property tax relief, because the school system will not have to collect the current 1.9 mil debt service you see on your property tax bill as "School Bond." For someone owning a home with a fair market value of \$200,000, that means an annual property tax savings of \$152.

The remaining revenue will fund classroom security systems; computer technology; system-wide roofing, paving, electrical, and HVAC upgrades; 75 new buses; and initial construction of new or expanded facilities for Eastside High School. Remember, salaries are not eligible for inclusion.

Good schools attract new businesses and quality jobs to our community, which generate additional tax revenues, which lead to even better schools. It's a virtuous cycle that improves quality of life for everyone. Events of the past decade have conspired to disrupt that cycle. It's up to you and me to do our part to keep it moving in a positive direction.