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Supervisors Nix Sales Tax Hike

By Nick Marnell

A measure to increase the Contra Costa County sales tax will not appear on the November ballot. Based on the results of a poll conducted by Oakland-based EMC Research, county voters would be in favor of using proceeds from a sales tax to augment fire and emergency response and to reopen fire stations, but were not likely to pass the countywide sales tax increase itself.

"Passing a tax would be challenging," said EMC vice president Tom Patras, who presented the poll results to the Board of Supervisors on June 24. He explained that if the election were held today, there was a 49 percent chance for a half-cent sales tax increase to pass and a 54 percent chance for voters to pass a quarter-cent increase. Passage of a general sales tax requires a simple majority.

In an open ended question posed by the research company, voters picked education as the most important problem facing the county. But in a question on the passage of a measure that would use sales tax revenue for dedicated funding rather than going into the general fund, voters responded 65 percent in favor of implementing a sales tax specifically for funding fire service, and 63 percent in favor of both maintaining emergency medical service and funding emergency medical response. Categories from which the 806 polled voters chose included fire and emergency medical response, more police officers, road repair, prosecution of criminals, increased hours for libraries and funding for Doctors Medical Center San Pablo; education was not listed as a selection. A dedicated sales tax requires a two-thirds majority for passage.

"I'm not happy, but we need to be realistic about these results," said Supervisor John Gioia.

"Generally, what you see in a poll on tax revenue erodes over time. It takes a very expensive campaign to hold your support." The board unanimously passed a motion to not place the sales tax increase on the November ballot.

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[back](#)

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