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Southampton voters reject local meals tax

By CATHERINE BAUM
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Wednesday, August 26, 2009

SOUTHAMPTON - Town residents shot down the proposed .75 percent meals tax Tuesday with 22 "yea" and 34 "nay" votes.

Supporters said the town needs a new revenue source like the meals tax, while opponents said the meals tax would single out restaurant owners and patrons.

Approximately 60 people filled the Town Hall meeting room Tuesday evening. Town officials opened the meeting at 7 p.m. at the William E. Norris Elementary School and reconvened it at Town Hall 15 minutes later because the school wasn't "set up" for Town Meeting, said Town Clerk Eileen Couture. Inside the crowded room, people opened doors and windows, and then they opened their mouths.

"We would like to see the town do it simply because we're collecting a lot less revenue from the state," said Robert Blanchette, chairman of the Finance Committee. "The state's feeling is, #If you choose not to accept it, fine. But don't expect that we will make up for it."

The meals tax, estimated to bring in an annual \$73,000, would help offset a portion of the \$190,000 reduction in state aid this fiscal year, Blanchette said. There is already a gap greater than \$100,000 in the \$13 million budget approved at Town Meeting this spring, according to Blanchette. The state would collect the tax from town restaurants and delis and return it quarterly to the town's general fund.

On the other hand, Edward H. Gwinner Jr., of 11 Golden Circle, maintained the meals tax would be bad for local businesses.

"These are businessmen that put out hundreds of thousands of dollars to try to make a living," said Gwinner, who is a builder. "We can not push them to the limit anymore. It's the economy. I'm a businessman, and business is not good."

People questioned the Department of Revenue's projections: If the meals tax passed Tuesday the town would collect approximately \$50,000 Oct. 1 through May 31.



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"I'm not sure how those numbers come into play," said Peter Kantos, who owns Opa Opa Steakhouse and Brewery in town along with Antonio and Efthimios Rizos and Christoforos Mirisis. "Forty-thousand to \$50,000 translates to an awful lot of revenue." Kantos noted he is not a resident of Southampton.

"The numbers seem to be fictitious," said Selectman Michael Phelan.

Town Administrator Diana Schindler said the department came up with its figures based on census data from the state.

"It doesn't have anything to do with the receipts of the restaurants individually. In fact, I don't think it collectively has anything to do with Southampton's restaurants," Schindler said. "They haven't gotten that far in calculating it, so that's why the numbers are all over the place. We really don't know."

Meanwhile, the Finance Committee supported the meals tax. If passed, the .75 percent tax on a \$20 meal would have added 15 cents to a person's bill or, on an annual basis, if a family spent \$1,000 per year in local restaurants it would amount to an additional \$7.50.

"The way I look at it is if I go down to Subway and spend 4 more cents, that's fine," said John Martin, of the Finance Committee. "It's better than an override. By getting that \$50,000 ... it's like we're getting a grant for a new police officer or teacher. Personnel is pretty much all we have left."

Selectmen said their board held a neutral stance, although the selectmen present Tuesday - Chairman David McDougall, Jess Dods and Michael Phelan - all voted against the measure.

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