

## Scio group lobbies against safety tax - Citizens question way board handles money

*Ann Arbor News, The (MI) (Published as Ann Arbor News (MI)) - August 5, 2006*

• Page: A2

• Readability: 11-12 grade level (Lexile: 1300)

election 2006

News Staff Reporter

A political action committee has formed in Scio Township to oppose the township's proposed 1.945-mill public safety tax.

Members of Scio Citizens for Fiscal Responsibility question the way township officials have been spending money and criticize the process used to put the proposal on the ballot.

But Township Supervisor Charles Nielsen says the township board has not spent money unwisely and that the process used to put the measure on the ballot was necessary because of a tight timetable.

The four-year millage is a special assessment for police and fire protection that would apply only to property outside the village of Dexter and only to real property, not to personal property. This would be the first time the township would have a dedicated millage for public safety. To date, those costs have been paid from the general fund.

Under the terms of the special assessment, the board could vote to levy all or part of the millage. If trustees levy the full amount, the millage would bring in about \$2.1 million the first year. The owner of a home with a market value of \$200,000 and a taxable value of \$100,000 would pay \$194.50 per year if the entire 1.945-mill tax is levied

PAC members criticize the township board for several decisions involving money. "The increase in spending prior to this has been a concern," said Joe Kaplan, who has been active in organizing the campaign committee.

Among the decisions under fire are the following:

\* The board approved 43 percent pay raises on June 21, 2005, for the supervisor, clerk and treasurer, raising their salaries from \$35,000 to \$50,000. Treasurer Donna Palmer voted against the measure and Trustee Charles Ream was absent.

Nielsen said the raises followed a study by former Interim Township Manager John Hansen. "It was a big jump in one shot, but if you look at what is the pay of officials in townships of similar population and equalized value, we're at the low end of the scale," Nielsen said.

\* The board approved a 3-percent pay raise for all full-time non-union employees but two and increased the township contribution to non-union employees' 401(k) plan from 5.5 percent to 8 percent. The chief financial officer's pay was set at \$60,000. The utility director's pay was set at \$65,000.

Nielsen said the increased contribution to the non-union employees' 401(k) plan had already been agreed to by the previous administration, and the 3-percent non-union pay raise was a recommendation of the Board of Trustees personnel committee.

Attempts to reach former Supervisor Spaulding Clark about the agreement to raise the 401(k) plan contribution were unsuccessful.

\* The board hired a township manager for \$85,200 when the township has a full-time supervisor.

Nielsen said that it is necessary to have a full-time supervisor and a township manager, even though Clark served as township supervisor and manager and was paid in the mid \$80,000 range. The township operates with less staff than townships of similar size, Nielsen said.

"There was no way that one person was going to do" all that has to be done, Nielsen said.

Nielsen said he became a full-time supervisor as soon as he took office in late 2004, but he was paid only a part-time salary of \$22,048 a year until the spring of 2005, when his salary was raised to \$35,000.

\* The board picked the largest of three millage options offered by the township Public Safety Study Committee. Kaplan and Max Goldman, another organizer of the committee, said that the Public Safety Study Committee recommended 0.75 mill and there "weren't any firm explanations" of why the board chose the highest millage option.

David Read, who was co-chairman of the Public Safety Study Committee, said there was no recommendation. The committee voted on the options, and the two lowest options, 0.75 mill and 0.903 mill, received 20 votes, while the highest option received 15 votes, Read said.

"I think it's being misconstrued," he said.

Nielsen said he preferred the highest of the three millage options offered by the Public Safety Study Committee because of expected future police costs.

"The other two (options) only bought us another year or two," Nielsen said.

Read said the two lowest millage options, 0.75 mill and 0.903 mill, would not have covered public safety costs by 2008 because of increased costs for police protection from the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department. The lowest option would not have covered the public safety costs entirely this year and in 2007, he said. The option that the board chose, 1.945 mills, would cover expected police costs through the end of the current police contract in 2009, Read said.

Kaplan and Goldman also said the township board is not being clear about what it will do with the \$1.4 million in general fund money the township now spends on public safety if that money is freed up by the millage.

"The justification for the numbers is ambiguous," Kaplan said. "They don't want to tell us that before the vote."

Nielsen said that general fund money freed up by the millage would be used to close the general fund budget gap that is this year is forcing the township to take \$431,000 from the reserve fund to balance the budget. Beyond that, the board may decide to restore the savings that have been used to cover the budget deficit and could consider other projects, such as a required update to the township's master plan or possibly providing public transportation in the township, Nielsen said.

Once the general fund budget gap is closed, the board also could decide to lower the public safety millage and once again use some general fund money to fund police and fire protection, Nielsen said.

Goldman said the group also objects to the process by which the township brought the millage to the ballot.

"We are not opposed to paying money for fire and safety," Goldman said. "Our issue is the process the board is going through to raise this money."

The board voted 6-0 May 26 to put the 1.945-mill request on the ballot, with Clerk Kathleen Knol absent, but the board did not have the required public hearing on the issue until July 18.

Nielsen said the deadline for getting the millage on the ballot made it necessary to have the public hearing after the board vote. The Public Safety Study Committee wanted the issue on the August ballot, said Nielsen, who was a non-voting member of the committee.

"They did solidly decide that August was the time to do this," Nielsen said. Waiting until July 18 to have the public hearing was a matter of "logistics," he said.

However, Read said the committee also felt it did not have enough time to develop a fully researched solution.

"We felt that there should have been more time dedicated to this," he said.

Goldman also said his group objects to having the election during the August primary.

"Why wouldn't they have it during the general election, where the majority of the people vote?" Goldman said.

Knol said that while she supports the millage, she believes the board should have had the public hearing before voting to put the issue on the ballot.

"I have concerns that we didn't follow the traditional and typical procedure when you create a special assessment district," Knol said.

By putting the millage on the ballot before the public hearing, the board didn't give the public a chance to give input, she said.

"The option that (the public has now) for input is to vote yes or vote no," Knol said.

Scio Citizens for Fiscal Responsibility has distributed fliers in the township urging a "no" vote on the millage request. But Kaplan and Goldman said their committee is not responsible for fliers distributed without a campaign committee identifier on them. Seven points on the unidentified flier are the same as those on the committee's fliers that bear the committee's name.

"Everything we distributed has had our identifier on it," Kaplan said.

Individuals acting on their own are allowed to distribute fliers without identifying themselves, and Kaplan and Goldman said they believe this is what happened.

John Mulcahy can be reached at [jmulcahy@annarbornews.com](mailto:jmulcahy@annarbornews.com) or 734-994-6858.

- *Record: 0416214624*

- *Copyright: Copyright, 2006, The Ann Arbor News. All Rights Reserved.*