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## **Primary ballot questions**

Endorsement advice on millage requests, charter changes

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Voters in several lakes area communities won't only decide the outcome of contested political races during the Tuesday, Aug. 5 primary election, they'll also weigh in on a handful of local ballot questions. Highland, Milford, West Bloomfield and White Lake seek voter authorization of various millage requests, while Walled Lake seeks voter approval on a trio of charter amendment proposals.

Look for our editorial endorsement on the regional Detroit Zoo tax on the primary ballot in the Wednesday, July 23 edition of the Spinal Column Newsweekly.

In the meantime, the following represents our recommendations to lakes area voters as they consider local ballot issues directly impacting their community.

### **HIGHLAND POLICE MILLAGE**

Highland Township voters are asked to renew the township's police millage for another six years. The millage was last renewed by voters in 2002 at 2.865 mills. Since then the Headlee Amendment to Michigan's Constitution has rolled back the levy to its current 2.7805-mill level. With the existing millage about to expire, the township seeks voter authorization to renew the millage at the current rate to pay for police services for 2009 through 2014. We encourage a YES vote on the renewal.

A mill is equal to \$1 for every \$1,000 of a property's taxable value, which is generally equal to half a property's market value. The owner of a Highland property with a taxable value of \$100,000 (\$200,000 market value) would pay \$278 in the first year of the renewed collection. The estimated revenue generated by the renewed millage in its first year of collection is \$2.35 million.

This is a pretty straight-forward proposal to maintain the current level of police services contracted through the Oakland County Sheriff's Department. The proposal doesn't represent an increase in taxes, but merely seeks to collect the millage at the current rate for another six years. Township officials are confident that renewing the millage at its current rate will provide enough revenue to preserve the existing level of services. The Aug. 5 ballot question is a relatively conservative request that needs to be approved.

The current millage has been collected for the last time, providing funding for police services during 2008. Without a renewal, the township wouldn't have the money to continue contracting with the Oakland County Sheriff's Department for police services. That's an unacceptable proposition.

Highland, like any other municipality, needs police services. Approval of the millage renewal proposal simply keeps the level of police service the township now receives. It also doesn't seek a tax hike; and voters should appreciate that the township isn't asking for the traditional 10-year collection and instead seeks a reserved six-year tax.

There's no reason for anything other than a YES vote at the August primary election polls.

### **MILFORD SENIOR CENTER MILLAGE**

It's been four years since a majority of Milford Township voters, including those living in Milford Village, approved a 0.125-mill levy to operate and maintain the Milford Senior Center. The township set the term of that initial millage proposal at four years, shorter than the common 10-year term, in order to assess whether the levy would be enough to support senior center operations. Township officials have determined the millage does provide adequate funding for the facility and have also decided the senior center itself is a viable facility, and therefore propose a 10-year millage collection at the current 0.125-mill rate.

Although not nearly as critical to the community as a public safety millage, those in Milford who believe it's important to maintain and operate a senior center will want to vote YES on the millage renewal.

While the Aug. 5 ballot question seeks renewal of the millage at the same rate that was initially collected, it doesn't represent a millage restoration. The senior center millage hasn't been rolled back under the Headlee Amendment over the past four years since property values in the community have been static or declining. As such, the township hasn't had to reduce the millage rate because the millage isn't generating any more revenue from one year to the next beyond the rate of inflation.

With a mill equal to \$1 for every \$1,000 of a property's taxable value, renewal of the millage would require the owner of a Milford property with a \$100,000 taxable value (\$200,000 market value) to continue paying \$12.50 in the first year of the renewed collection. It's estimated that the millage will generate \$122,853 in revenue in the first year of the 10-year collection.

Thanks to the money provided by the initial, four-year millage, the senior center has been renovated to support new programs and activities. That's reportedly resulted in a tremendous increase in membership, according to township officials. That should make it an easy decision to vote YES on the millage renewal for those who value programs and services that keep senior citizens active and healthy.

## WALLED LAKE

### CHARTER AMENDMENTS

Three proposed charter amendments will be decided by Walled Lake voters on Aug. 5. The first two involve changes in deadlines under the city's budgeting process, and the third relates to penalties for certain ordinance violations. The first two proposals would make it a bit easier for the city officials to formulate and adopt city budgets, and deserve YES votes. The third proposal is a common-sense change that also should be adopted with a YES vote.

Proposal No. 1 would change the date by which the City Council must approve a budget, appropriations and a levy for the next fiscal year. Under Section 8.3 of the Walled Lake City Charter, the council must adopt the next fiscal year budget by the third Monday in May. A yes vote on this proposal would create additional time to finalize the budget by changing the date in Section 8.3 to the second Monday in June.

City officials typically receives updated property assessment figures and tax information from the county in late March. That information is essential in the budgeting process. Approval of Proposal No. 1 would give the council an additional three weeks to consider and ultimately approve a new budget. The proposal wouldn't change the city's fiscal year.

We have no qualms about giving the council some valuable extra time to mull over budget proposals, and neither should the city's voters. Our hope is that the additional time afforded to consider the budget will result in more thorough review of budget proposals and number crunching by council members. That's well worth a YES vote next month.

Proposal No. 2 also deals with the city's budgeting practices. The City Charter's Section 8.1 currently states the city budget officer shall submit a recommended budget for the next fiscal year to the City Council by the third Monday in April. Approval of this proposal would create additional time to submit the recommended budget by changing the date in Section 8.1 to the third Monday in May each year. This amendment won't take effect unless Proposal No. 1 is approved.

The gist behind Proposal No. 2 is the same as that for Proposal No. 1. Voter approval of this charter amendment would give the city administration an extra month to develop a budget proposal for City Council consideration. Providing more time to draft a budget is a wise move. With the city's fiscal year beginning each July 1, there's no reason not to take some extra time to come up with a budget proposal. The four-week extension of the proposed budget submission to the City Council would allow the administration some breathing room to be more thoughtful while preparing the next fiscal year's budget plan. That's why we're backing a YES vote on Proposal No. 2.

Proposal No. 3 represents a house-cleaning issue relative to penalties for ordinance violations. Section 7.4 of the Walled Lake City Charter states punishment for a local ordinance violation shall not exceed 90 days in jail and/or a \$500 fine. However, state law allows greater maximum penalties for violations of certain local ordinances. Proposal No. 3 states that penalties for local ordinance violations shall not exceed the maximum penalty allowable under state law in the event state law allows a greater penalty for a particular offense.

This is a fairly benign proposed change in the charter that should be approved with a YES vote. The change merely ensures that ordinance violators can't be saddled with a penalty that exceeds those authorized under state law. Walled

Lake voters should approve the change by voting YES on Proposal No. 3.

## **WEST BLOOMFIELD**

### **PARKS AND RECREATION MILLAGE**

Voters in West Bloomfield approved a 0.25-mill "active recreation" levy in 1990, and backed a renewal in 2000. Although the existing millage isn't due to expire this year, township officials are seeking a 10-year renewal of the millage now because there's no regularly scheduled elections in 2009 and they don't want to wait until the last minute to seek a renewal in August or November of 2010. The renewed millage would be collected to support parks and recreation from 2011 until 2020.

Ordinarily a drive for an early millage renewal would give us pause when it comes to an endorsement. However, this ballot question and plans for implementing the renewal are structured such that we have no hesitation in recommending a YES vote.

Due to Headlee Amendment provisions, the current active recreation millage rate has been reduced to 0.22 mills. If voters authorize the renewal, the existing millage approved in 2000 will continue to be collected and impacted by Headlee Amendment provisions. The renewed millage wouldn't be collected until December 2010 to provide funding for 2011. However, the renewed millage would be collected at the rate allowed under the Headlee Amendment at that time, meaning it could very well be collected at less than 0.22 mills as long as property values increase in the next two years.

Since a mill is equal to \$1 for every \$1,000 of a property's taxable value, the owner of a township property with a taxable value of \$100,000 (\$200,000 market value) would pay no more than \$22 in the first year of the renewed collection — perhaps less.

The active recreation millage can be used for acquisition, development, maintenance and operation of the township parks and recreation facilities. Therefore, it can be considered a general operating millage, despite its informal characterization as an active recreation millage.

If approved by voters next month, the renewed millage would collect no more than \$924,000 in its first year. That's about 17 percent of the Parks and Recreation budget adopted last November at \$5.5 million.

West Bloomfield voters have been pretty generous over the years when it comes to approving taxes for parks and recreation programming and operations. Obviously, the township's recreation programs and facilities are important to voters, who have grown accustomed to the many opportunities provided the Parks and Recreation Department.

The township isn't asking for any kind of increase in the tax rate, so there's no reason not to support a 10-year renewal of the millage by voting YES during the primary election.

## **WHITE LAKE**

### **POLICE AND FIRE MILLAGE**

The ballot proposal before White Lake Township voters is a little different than those in Highland, Milford, and West Bloomfield for a couple of reasons. First, the question involves a combined police and fire millage. In addition, the question asks voters to restore the police and fire millage to its original level for a six-year term, not merely renew it at its existing level as reduced by Headlee Amendment provisions. These unique nuances shouldn't dissuade voters from voting YES next month on this imperative police and fire millage ballot question.

The combined millage levy for police and fire services was originally approved by voters in 1998 at the rate of 1.35 mills for a 10-year period. It was renewed in 1998 at 1.1349 mills following 10 years of Headlee Amendment rollbacks. The millage has been rolled back to a current rate of 1.017 mills. It has already been collected for the last time. Without voter approval next month, the departments would have massive, crippling holes in their respective budgets.

Of the 1.35-mill levy, 0.80 mills would be dedicated to the police department and 0.55 would be collected for the fire department. The total revenue generated from the restored millage in the first year of its collection would be approximately \$1.7 million.

The increased annual revenue created by restoring the millage to its original level as opposed to renewing it at the current rate is about \$400,000. The White Lake Police Department would get about \$250,000 of that additional revenue, while the Fire Department would receive about \$150,000 more in the first year of the collection.

Besides maintaining the current level of services provided by the police and fire departments, the millage restoration would give the police department enough additional annual funding to hire three more police officers. The fire department would use its new annual revenue to hire two additional career firefighters.

The ballot proposal is a justified and wise move on several fronts. While other communities have already reached their development potential, White Lake continues to attract new developments. That creates additional work for the township's police and firefighters. A modest increase in the number of police officers and career firefighters working in the community is reasonable and necessary.

The community would benefit from the relatively short, six-year millage collection. This shorter millage term will let both township officials and voters determine after just six years whether the 1.35-mill levy is adequate.

Also, township officials decided to request the six-year term because four other police millages and three fire millages are due to expire in 2013. The township has created a committee to study all the public safety millages and consider possible consolidation scenarios which would provide an alternative to what seems like voters being asked to approve police and fire levies every other year. That's a smart approach, as the many police and fire millages with different expiration dates confuse some voters who think the township is constantly seeking new taxes when it's only seeking renewals.

Failure to approve the Aug. 5 ballot question would be devastating to the community. The loss of over a million dollars in annual operating revenue for the police and fire departments would require drastic reductions in services at a time when the police and firefighters are being asked to serve a growing community. The millage proposal is definitely worthy of a YES vote.