

**BPAC Poll Results and Opinion Paper:
Public response to putting the
half-cent sales tax on the 2014 Election Ballot.**

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Brevard Parents Action Committee (BPAC)

Executive Summary:

On 22 October 2013 the Brevard County School Board voted to place a half-cent sales surtax referendum on the 2014 General Election Ballot. Brevard Parents Action Committee (BPAC) created an online poll to increase awareness of this topic and gauge the sentiment of Brevard County residents for this proposed surtax.

The poll was open to participation for a little under one week. The poll encompassed the day the School Board voted on pursuing the sales surtax and the five days following their vote.

The results of the poll point to the likelihood of the surtax failing. There are a significant number of poll participants who indicate that they are not comfortable with providing additional tax revenue due to real or perceived trust issues with Brevard Public Schools and the School Board.

Assumptions:

We assume the following variables on the sales surtax ballot issue:

- The minimum Term of the Surtax will be 10 Years.
- The trend of Brevard County historically rejecting additional sales taxes through ballot referendums will not reverse.

The above assumptions are based on a presentation by the Superintendent to the School Board titled Capital Budget & Referendum Information (dated October 8, 2013), referendum data leading up to a previous education surtax vote in election year 2012 and data obtained through the Brevard County Supervisor of Elections web site and office.

Poll Purpose & Methodology:

The poll sought to gather public sentiment towards the proposed sales tax during the week the ballot initiative was approved by the Brevard County School Board.

Polling was open from the evening of Monday 21 October 2013 at 10:28 pm through Sunday 27 October 2013 11:59 pm. The original intent was to keep the polling open for the immediate time frame around the School Board meeting of 22 October 2013, however we extended the poll through the end of the week due to the interest and participation level.

Intended Audience: Residents of Brevard County, the stakeholders in the outcome of the proposed Sales Tax.

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Risks and Mitigation:

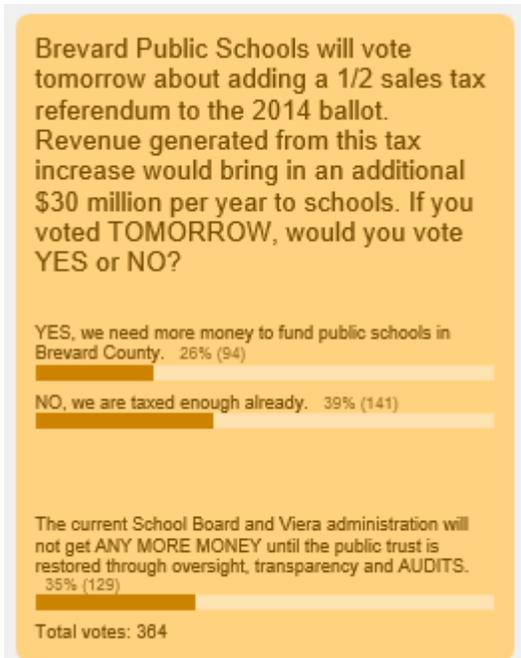
- Data validity risk: The poll was informal and open to anyone who can navigate to it on the internet. This, by its technical nature, permits people who are not residents of Brevard County to participate. This risk is tempered by the scope of awareness of the poll to the intended audience through publishing the link in Brevard County specific media, primarily through the BPAC Facebook Page and as a side bar to the Florida Today news article published 22 October 2013 by Mackenzie Ryan, their Education Reporter.
- Participant bias risk: Some online poll technologies permit multiple submissions by the same participant which will result in the data being skewed towards their personal bias. The data can be significantly skewed by a few participants who are determined to affect the results to validate their positions on the topic being polled. This risk is partially offset by a technical restriction that permits only one poll submission per computer (IP address recognition enabled) to help prevent the skewing of poll results towards a specific personal bias.
- Poll publisher bias risk: The poll was published by the BPAC – A non-partisan, non-aligned organization. Our members consist of a diverse cross section of political and ideological philosophies and all members have equal input into any official BPAC opinions and publications, however each member is free to express their personal opinions on any topic as long as it is not portrayed as a BPAC position. For the current topic of the proposed Sales Tax, BPAC has no official position at this time and BPAC will not take a position on this topic until the actual ballot language is finalized and reviewed by our members to determine our support or opposition to this initiative.

Poll Questions and Rationale:

The poll asked how participants would vote on the half-cent sales tax if they voted tomorrow.

We believe this topic invokes strong opinions in the public and may roughly align to political and ideological philosophies that can range from absolute support regardless of the need or reason to absolute opposition for one or more reasons. Because there is a broad spectrum of opinion in the public we felt the poll should go beyond a basic YES (support) or NO (oppose) poll and provide a third option to gauge if there are potential supporters with reservations on this topic due to real or perceived trust issues with the current School Board and District Administration.

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The poll provided three options for the participants to choose from:

1. Yes, we need more money to fund public schools in Brevard County.
2. No, we are taxed enough already.
3. The current School Board and Viera [District] administration will not get any more money until the public trust is restored through oversight, transparency and audits.

Because of the wide range of opinions we've observed through communication with members of the intended audience and the strong emotions tied to the topic, we chose to use somewhat provocative wording to bolster participation by those viewing the poll. For our purpose of measuring the public sentiment these questions translate to:

1. Yes – Support the Tax.
2. No – Oppose the Tax
3. Cannot Support the Tax Under the Current Governance.

While the first two are self-explanatory the third warrants further clarification. The intent of the third question is to quantify those participants who are potentially open to the surtax however they have reservations with the current District Administration and School Board about managing the new revenue in a manner they feel is responsible.

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Poll Results:

Total Submissions: 364

Yes (Support) the tax: 94 votes (26%)

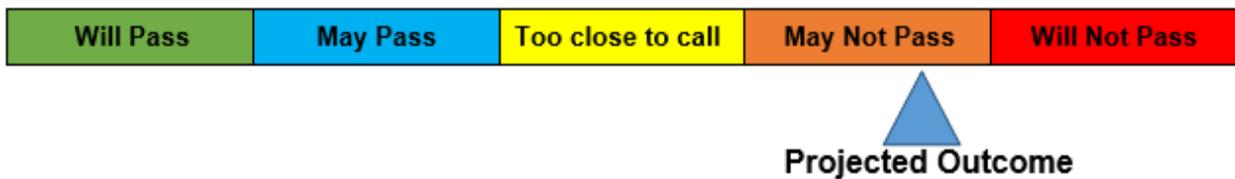
No (Oppose) the tax: 141 votes (39%)

Cannot support under the current governance: 129 votes (35%)

BPAC Projected Outcome of the Surtax Referendum:

While the sample data is small in comparison to the average number of voters during a non-Presidential election cycle in Brevard County, it is useful as an input to project a potential outcome of the ballot issue at this point in time when used in conjunction with the assumptions stated earlier in this document.

The following scale represents our best estimate of the 2014 half-cent sales tax referendum outcome based on what we know and assume as of the date of publication.



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The primary factors contributing to this estimate:

- Historical voting trend for additional sales taxes in a conservative leaning county.
- Historical evidence of the failure to obtain voter buy-in on this referenda topic.
- The 2014 General Election is not a Presidential election cycle which will likely add more weight to the older and generally more conservative voters.
- Of the three questions posed in our sample set only one can be translated to a Yes vote and the remaining are either a Firm No vote or Likely No vote. The combined Firm No and Likely No votes together account for almost 75% of the responses.

BPAC Opinion, Observations & Recommendations:

BPAC does not have a position on the surtax at this time and recognize it is truly is up to the voters to determine the outcome.

Based on our informal poll, BPS must focus on the estimated one-third of the public who are in the 'Cannot support under the current governance' category. There is much work to be done by BPS to justify the additional tax revenue and gain voter buy-in in this group.

Our observations and recommendations are as follows:

Public outreach and education: Brevard Public Schools does not appear to be fully invested in communication of this ballot issue at this time based on availability of information. The home page of the BPS web site (<http://www.brevard.k12.fl.us/>) has no readily accessible information concerning this tax referendum.

Additionally, a basic search on the Brevard Public Schools Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/BrevardPublicSchools>) also fails to inform the public of this important topic as of the publish date of this document.

For the 2012 election cycle, BPS District Administration held many community forums and meetings about the referendum which typically had low turnout and the level of effort yielded a low return on the objective.

While the Superintendent had a number of articles appear in Florida Today in an effort to communicate to the public, and this is a very effective method of outreach, it is insufficient to reach the majority of the public.

Recommendation: Do not rely only on periodic newspaper articles with a single publisher, word of mouth, School Board meeting minutes, School flyers and personal (or group) advocacy. Place the information about the 2014 Sales tax referendum front and center on all available contact points with the parents and voters and ensure it can be found through common methods on the internet.

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While all of the efforts mentioned in this observation should be done BPS must go farther. You must engage your intended audience and encourage their participation when announcing public meetings or forums prominently on all of your contact points and provide the public with a reasonable expectation their concerns will factor into decisions and not just be heard or rebutted.

Newspaper articles should be supplemented with other media such as Public Service Announcement type broadcasts on radio stations and other social media technologies for the broadest possible reach.

Conversation with the public: The approach leading up to the last election and those employed to date by BPS is lacking in terms of gaining meaningful public buy-in on any topic. The observed approach consists of little more than using the bully pulpit to justify the need for additional revenue and waiting for responses through one or more means available to the public. The responses typically consist of Public Comments at School Board meetings (for which there is a significant time gap for it to reach the School Board and District Administration and limited time for public speakers), comments to newspaper articles (to which there is rarely, if ever, a response by the District Administration), occasional Radio Talk Show participation by some School Board Members with limited interaction and public submission via email or direct mail. These methods do not constitute a meaningful conversation with the public.

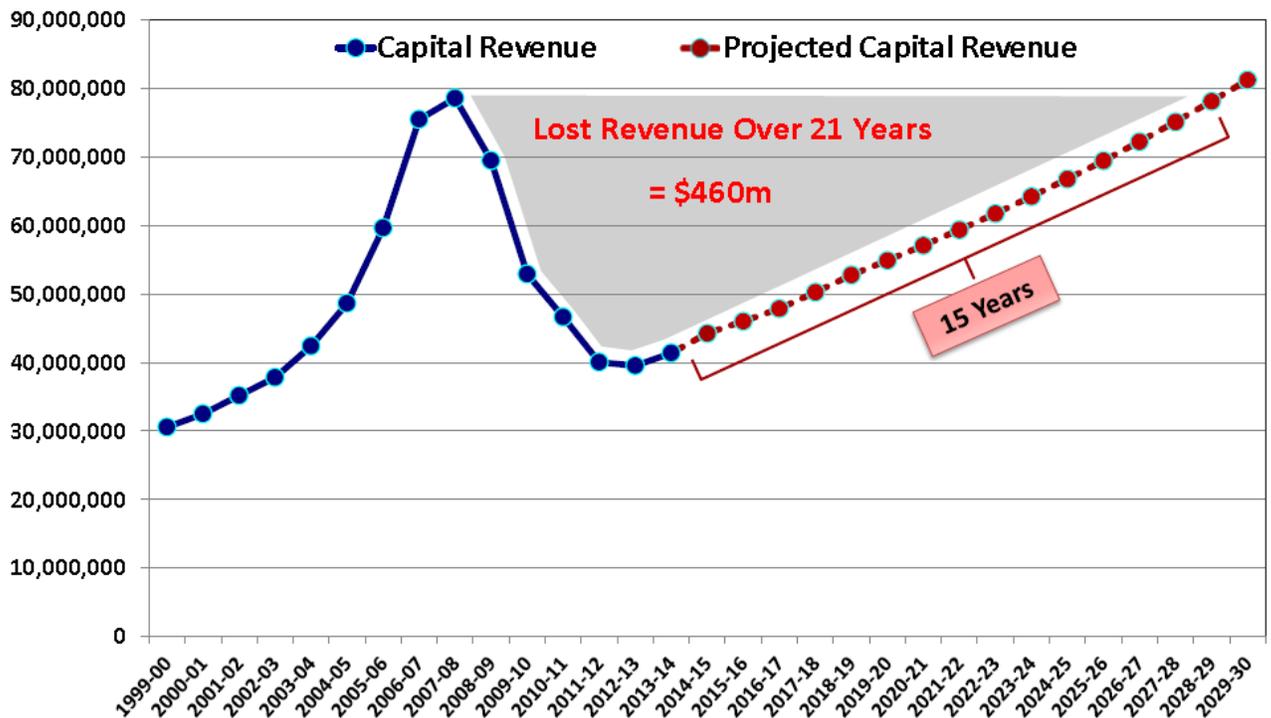
Recommendation: Schedule periodic public meetings with the public where there is two way dialog with the School Board and District Administration. We expect this will be difficult in some circumstances however we believe the residents of this County would appreciate the opportunity to participate in the process and not just observe it, hear about it after the fact or have the interaction delegated to senior staff with predetermined dialog topics.

Creating additional controversy on controversial topics: Statements like 'war on math and physics', 'this community has not seen anything yet if the sales tax does not go through', 'tragic' and so forth can serve as a 'rally cry' but, for the most part, motivates those who already support you. To those having some level of skepticism about how you conduct business these kind of statements may push them further away from your desired outcome. Controversy and fear tactics (intended or not) is not a means to an end with the group voters and tax payers you need to convince to support the sales tax.

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Recommendation: Engage the public with meaningful conversation about the issues faced in our schools as outlined in a previous recommendation.

Improper use of forecasting to justify your actions: Many of the presentations and discussion around the BPS Budget shortfalls involves the use of the 2007-08 revenue as the high water mark. The record revenue for that year is the equivalent to a storm surge mark or, to use a term from the financial crisis of the same period, a revenue bubble. The use of this peak revenue as the starting point to illustrate shortfalls or lost revenue such as page 10 of the Capital Budget & Referendum Information (dated October 8, 2013) is disingenuous at best.



This practice is a contributing factor of the public distrust of the BPS District Administration by many individuals.

Recommendation: Use commonly accepted trend formulas to smooth out the data and illustrate a more real world scenario to base your forecasts on. To acknowledge and account for the revenue anomaly instead of using it to emphasize a budget challenge will help instill public confidence in the BPS Administration.

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Don't ask for a 'leap of faith' from the voters: The District Administration and School Board has suffered a loss of public confidence over the last year. To ask voters to commit to the expected surtax term of 10 years is likely a stretch at this time. This observation of asking for a 'leap of faith' is further supported by the first two line items of the October 8, 2013 Capital Budget & Referendum Information presentation page 4 which identifies the new revenue as possibly being used for additional long term financing in the form of new Certificate of Participation (COP) or Revenue Anticipation Notes (RAN) or new debt financings.

Projects	FS 1011.73	FS 1011.73	FS 1010.40 -1010.62	FS 212.055 (2)	FS 212.055 (6)
New construction or new purchase of facilities-COP/RAN Projects	YES	YES	YES	YES (3)	YES (3)
New debt financings (using new pledged revenues)	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES

Recommendation: Ask the voters to support the surtax for a term of four years at a time and use the new revenue to make the needed capital improvements and purchases, not to take on additional debt to meet these needs. Have an independent citizen oversight committee review and approve expenditures using the surtax revenues and publish periodic reports to the public domain explaining the expenditures. A caveat to this recommendation is that the oversight committee must be formed through a process other than appointment by the School Board or Superintendent. This is required to demonstrate true independence of the oversight committee. Pinellas County uses a similar oversight model and their voters have approved a surtax on conditions that an independent oversight committee is implemented. A quote by Beth Rawlins from the Tampa Bay Times news article about Pinellas County Schools sales tax sums this recommendation up nicely: “the referendum's design — specific, limited in duration and independently scrutinized — may satisfy those with concerns about government spending.”

If you demonstrate acceptable use of the additional revenue per oversight committee recommendations and can also demonstrate the continuing need for the additional revenue every four years we believe you will stand a much greater chance of finding the public support you need to meet the challenges you face.

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References:

Brevard Public Schools website:

<http://www.brevard.k12.fl.us/>

Brevard County Supervisor of Elections website:

<http://www.votebrevard.com/>

October 8, 2013 Capital Budget & Referendum Information Presentation:

<http://eagendatoc.brevardschools.org/10-08-2013%20Regular%20School%20Board%20Meeting%20on%20Tuesday,%20October%2008,%202013/A00E43E0-9CC7-48D9-B99F-298C3F51B3B9.pdf>

October 22, 2013 Florida Today News Article: School Board backs putting half-cent sales tax vote on ballot by Mackenzie Ryan:

<http://www.floridatoday.com/article/20131023/NEWS13/310230015/School-B>

February 8, 2012 Tampa Bay Times News Article: Pinellas School Board steers tax renewal to November ballot by Ron Matus:

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/pinellas-school-board-steers-tax-renewal-to-november-ballot/1214357>