

# Students debate sales tax

## Jon Knutson, The Forum Published Friday, May 09, 2008

The public debate on the proposed half-cent Cass County economic development sales tax will be settled by voters on June 10.

But a Thursday night debate and a straw poll that followed gave mixed signals on how county voters might respond.


Judges of a debate between two Fargo high school teams over the merits of the tax gave the victory to the pro-tax debaters.

The subsequent straw poll produced 29 votes opposing the tax and 14 supporting it, according to organizers.

The debate and poll were sponsored by the Voter Collaborative, a group associated with the Moorhead-based People Escaping Poverty Project.

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About 60 people attended the event, held at North Dakota State University.

The Voter Collaborative was searching for ways to raise public interest in the proposed sales tax, said Chuck Stebbins, community organizer for the People Escaping Poverty Project.

"We thought a high school debate would be a good way of doing it," he said.

Neither the Voter Collaborative nor the People Escaping Poverty Project are taking a stand on the proposed tax, Stebbins said.

The half-cent sales tax would last for 12 years, raising a projected \$9.4 million the first year, with a 4 percent increase in each subsequent year.

The Greater Fargo Moorhead Economic Development Corp., which supports the tax, said the money would help finance a growth

plan designed to bring more high-tech jobs to the metro area.

Brian Walters, president of the development corporation, said Thursday afternoon he wasn't going to attend the debate and that he had no comment on it.

"It's not part of what our organization is doing to promote awareness," he said.

Thursday's debate, judged by local educators, was conducted in a high school format – structured and timed.

Bill Restemayer, a Shanley High School senior, and Mason Lende, a Shanley junior, argued in favor of the proposed tax.

Aurora Obembe and Phoebe Strom, both sophomores at Fargo North High School, argued against it.

Restemayer and Lende said changing economic conditions require Cass County to go after more high-tech jobs and that such jobs would benefit the entire community.

Obembe and Strom argued that money generated by the tax would be better spent for other purposes, including giving economic incentives to young metro residents who remain in the community.

The judges ruled that Restemayer and Lende presented a stronger case.

Becca Sorgert of Fargo and Casey Wollschlaeger of Moorhead attended the debate and said they enjoyed it.

"It was a fun, interesting way of helping people learn more about the issue," Sorgert said.

Both women said what they heard at the debate reinforced their belief that the proposed tax, on balance, wouldn't be a good thing.

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