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HOT

City voters to decide whether to implement 1% tax for schools

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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Winchester voters will determine whether the city will implement a 1% retail sales tax whose proceeds would be used exclusively for the construction, renovation or improvement of public schools.

City Attorney Melisa Michelsen told City Council at its meeting on Tuesday night that the Virginia General Assembly this year amended state code so that all localities can hold voter referendums on implementing a new dedicated tax to support schools.

"There has already been eight or nine localities that have initiated a referendum," Michelsen said.

One of those is Frederick County, where the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously last week to initiate a referendum to benefit public schools in the county.

City Council followed suit on Tuesday and voted unanimously to initiate a referendum for Winchester as well. In October, Michelsen said the Winchester Circuit Court clerk will advertise the referendum so the question regarding implementation of a new 1% retail sales tax can be included on ballots for the Nov. 3 general election.

"I think this is a fantastic opportunity," Mayor Les Veach said. "We need the citizens to get behind it."

If voters support the new tax, City Council will formally adopt the measure following the general election. Michelsen said council will have the option of keeping the tax rate at 1% per each dollar spent or setting a lower rate, but it cannot set the rate higher than 1%.

Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer Mary Blowe said a 1% retail sales tax would generate approximately \$14 million per year that could be used for capital projects with Winchester Public Schools. However, the tax would not be assessed for purchases of fruits and vegetables;

meat, poultry and seafood; dairy products; legumes and nuts; prepared foods such as soups and casseroles; processed foods that meet FDA food safety and labeling standards; and essential personal hygiene products for incontinence and menstruation.

"This is well overdue," Councilor Emily Windle said. "This sales tax dedicated for capital improvements for schools is one of the silver bullets that we can [use] to help with the constant, evolving budget challenges that we have."

Blowe said school projects would be allowed to move forward before sufficient tax revenues have been collected because the city would apply for bonds to fund construction, then repay that debt over time with proceeds from the sales tax. That approach would allow, for example, \$38.5 million worth of planned improvements at Quarles Elementary School to move forward without waiting until there's enough money in reserves.

"To me, this is a no-brainer," Councilor Chip Newcome said. "I'm behind this."

In other business at Tuesday night's meeting in Rouss City Hall, City Council:

- Unanimously approved a conditional-use permit (CUP) to allow Shenandoah University to place utility and accessory equipment in the front or corner side yard of a new building to be constructed at 620 Millwood Ave., on the college's campus, and to get an exemption from the city's zoning standard that requires a main building to be within 50 feet of a public right-of-way. The structure in question is a new performing arts center that the university hopes to build on a vacant parcel of land between Millwood Avenue and Shenandoah's Ohrstrom-Bryant Theatre.
- Unanimously agreed to allow the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum at 19 W. Cork St. to encroach airspace above the city's right-of-way in front of the museum. The nonprofit facility plans to add an interactive exhibit featuring a Bell 430 helicopter to its roof later this year, and the front of the helicopter would hang above Cork Street.
- Unanimously agreed to make amendments to the city's policy governing how written statements from citizens for public hearings and the public comment portions of City Council meetings must be submitted. Among the changes are stipulations that written comments must be limited to 5,000 characters and submitted through the city's website, winchesterva.gov.
- Voted 8-0 to approve the 2026-2027 action plan prepared by the city of Winchester and the Northern Shenandoah Valley Consortium regarding the use of funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Those funds are intended to improve housing options for low- and moderate-income families. Councilor Kim Herbstritt, the executive director of the nonprofit Blue Ridge Habitat for Humanity, recused herself from the vote because HUD proceeds could potentially benefit her organization.
- Unanimously agreed to submit an application for Smart Scale funding from the Virginia Department of Transportation to be used for safety improvements on Amherst Street. If the application is submitted and approved, it would fully fund the addition of a second left turn lane on northbound Meadow Branch Avenue at its intersection with Amherst Street, measures to restrict left turns coming out of the McDonald's restaurant at 1887 Amherst St., and provide left turn signal phasing and pedestrian refuge islands at the Campus Boulevard and Meadow Branch Avenue intersections with Amherst Street.

- Unanimously agreed to cover the position of emergency medical technician under the Virginia Retirement System's enhanced-duty benefits program.
- Held a first reading of a proposed ordinance that would amend the master development plan for 1840 Amherst St. Property owner Winchester Medical Center wants to add a surgical wing to its main tower complex and build a new medical office building and two new parking garages.
- Held a first reading of a proposed ordinance that would amend the 2019 development plan associated with 501 Treetops Lane. The owners of Treetops Park Apartments initially wanted to construct 20 apartments at the site, but now hope to build 28 townhomes instead.
- Held a first reading of a proposed ordinance to rezone a 0.158-acre city-owned parcel at 305 E. Piccadilly St. from Education/Institution/Public Use (EIP) to Limited High Density Residential (HR-1). The property formerly accommodated the Timbrook House and was used by the Northern Shenandoah Valley Substance Use Coalition, which moved last year to 2913 Valley Ave., Suite 150, in Winchester. The Timbrook House was demolished earlier this year due to its deteriorating condition and the city's Economic Development Authority now wants to build a residential duplex at the site to create more affordable housing for working families.
- Met in closed session for 23 minutes to discuss the performance and employment of City Manager John Piper. No action was taken following the closed-door talks.

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