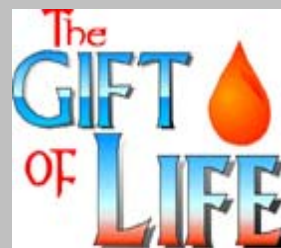




The Scott County Virginia Star is sponsoring a blood drive to be held at the Courthouse Parking Lot Thursday, March 11 from 8:00 AM - 2:30 PM for the Marsh Regional Blood Bank. Call the Scott County Virginia Star at (276) 386-6300 or (276)386-7027 to schedule your appointment.



*Be a blood donor and give the best gift you can possibly offer...*

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**Virginians Rally For, Against Tax Hikes as Legislators Negotiate A State Budget**

Michael Glennon  
Capital News Service



About 150 taxpayers rallied outside the Capitol on Monday to oppose tax increases to fund the state budget. They urged the

General Assembly to hold a statewide referendum on whether to raise taxes.

Earlier in the day, educators, health-care providers, students and emergency responders sent a different message to legislators seeking to craft a budget before they adjourn on Saturday: We need more funding, and more funding requires more taxes.

Referendum supporters wore stickers reading "No Tax Hike" and "Trust the people, Mark." They heard Republican leaders encourage Democratic

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Gov. Mark Warner to allow Virginia voters to decide whether taxes are necessary.

Warner has said a referendum would cause the kind of chaos California's state government has experienced. He said it is the General Assembly's job to write a budget -- and that Virginia needs one before the new fiscal year begins on July 1.

At the pro-referendum rally, Attorney General Jerry Kilgore said Warner is suggesting the tax code might be too complex for voters to understand.

"Don't ever, ever underestimate the intelligence of the people of the Commonwealth of Virginia," said Kilgore, who will probably be the Republicans' gubernatorial candidate next year.

Under the plan espoused by Kilgore and other anti-tax activists, the General Assembly would extend the current state budget and allow voters to decide whether to raise taxes to provide additional funding for education, transportation or other services.

The Assembly is in a stalemate on a budget for the next two years. The House has passed a \$58 billion budget that would boost revenues by about \$500 million by ending certain business tax breaks. The Senate's \$62 billion budget includes a \$3.9 billion increase in sales, income, gas, cigarette and other taxes. Warner originally submitted a \$59 billion budget that included a \$1 billion tax increase.

A conference committee of five delegates and four senators is trying to craft a compromise acceptable to both chambers. If the legislative session ends without an agreement, lawmakers would have to return for a special session. Without a state budget, officials say, state government might shut down on July 1.

Many Republicans in the House of Delegates

support the referendum proposal. "We have supported this idea as a compromise," said House Majority Leader H. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem.

Previous tax referenda have fared poorly in Virginia. In 2002, regional tax referenda both in Northern Virginia and the Tidewater region failed.

Many of the people at the midday rally supporting a referendum said they would vote against an increase in state taxes.

"Budget increases for Virginia equal budget decreases for families," said Sen. Ken Cuccinelli, R-Centreville.

On Monday morning, however, the stickers on people's coats had a different message: "No Train Wreck!"

At a news conference held by the Foundation for Virginia, speakers said that schools, law enforcement, roads and other critical functions of state government will suffer if the General Assembly does not adopt and fund an adequate state budget.

Former U.S. Senator Paul Trible, who chairs the nonprofit foundation, is backing a tax increase to support public schools and the state's universities.

"The future of Virginia requires that we invest in public education," said Trible, the president of Christopher Newport University and a former U.S. congressman.

Jean Bankos, president of the Virginia Education Association, praised the Senate's budget plan for higher taxes and more spending on services. Bankos said the current budget won't be enough for the expanding school population if Virginia is to keep the same quality of education.

"The Senate budget rights the course of our commonwealth," she said. "We are very hopeful that the rhetoric and political posturing will give way to leadership."

A group of about 20 Young Democrats from Virginia Commonwealth University attended the dueling events at the Capitol to support tax increases for education.

"All educational institutions are in desperate need of funding," said Claire Chapman, a VCU sophomore. "A lot of schools have lost accreditation because of lack of funding."

Peter Feddo, president emeritus of VCU Young Democrats, criticized the proposed tax referendum. "People elect legislators to make a budget."

Besides education, Virginia's emergency response services need more money, Mike Mohler, president of the Virginia Professional Fire Fighters, said at the Foundation for Virginia's news conference.

"We are ill-equipped to respond to the challenges (fire departments) face every day. We only have 10 percent of the personnel necessary to respond to a building collapse," said Mohler, a captain in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.

"We are in a state of crisis and emergency."

CNS reporter LaTasha James contributed to this report.

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