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Tie vote means no Fruita recreation center

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FRUITA — One vote really can make a difference.

Fruita's Referendum A ended up in a tie vote Wednesday, which means the measure to raise the city's sales-and-use-tax by 1 cent to fund a community recreation center was defeated.

Ballot issues for municipal elections require a majority vote to pass, said Fruita City Clerk Margaret Steelman.

Preliminary results indicated Tuesday night that votes in favor of Issue A were ahead by two.

Six ballots were rejected Tuesday night.

Wednesday morning election officials were reviewing those ballots.

"The canvassing board met and determined some of those could be counted," said Deputy Chief Clerk Amy Storm.

Four of the rejected ballots were later added to the vote, when required information was located.

Two ballots were rejected because they lacked required forms.

The additional votes — three "no" and one "yes" — brought the total Wednesday to 1,262 votes in favor and 1,262 votes against.

After certifying the results Wednesday morning the canvassing board ordered a recount.

When the difference is half of 1 percent, an automatic recount has to be called, Storm said.

The vote remained tied after the recount.

Approximately 35 supporters of Issue A gathered at Hot Tomato Cafe Tuesday night awaiting election results.

Hot Tomato owners Jen Zeuner and Anne Keller stayed open late for the occasion. Both women were hoping to see the measure pass.

"We get a lot of kids who come in who just want to hang out because they don't have anywhere to go," Zeuner said. "We have parents who drop off kids and say, 'Hang out at Hot

Tomato' — like we're baby-sitters."

The proposed recreation center would have included a fitness area, a senior center, an indoor pool, a gymnasium, an indoor running track and group exercise areas.

Also, plans called for refurbishing the existing nearby outdoor pool.

Mesa County Libraries was partnering with the city to build a new branch library adjoining the recreation center, if passed.

Joe Miller, owner of Fruita Fitness Center, and a group called Lower Valley Seniors mounted a strong campaign to defeat the measure.

Miller said a city recreation center would unfairly compete with his business.

Lou Mudd belongs to the Fruita Fitness Center, but he supported the concept of a community recreation center and was hanging out with other supporters Tuesday at the Hot Tomato. Mudd said there's room for both types of facilities in a community.

A community recreation center is "good for the quality of life in a community," Mudd said.

"It's worth a 1-cent sales tax," Mudd said.

Lower Valley Senior Mike Howitt opposed the measure.

"Seniors want to be with seniors. They don't want to be with 18-year-olds when they're exercising," Howitt said.

Fruita's new mayor Ken Henry said he voted for the recreation center and is disappointed it didn't pass.

Henry said opponents were successful in confusing the issue by mailing out incorrect information.

Days before the election, some residents received postcards that said "Can you afford HIGHER Property Taxes? Vote NO on A." There was nothing in the referendum regarding property taxes. The postcards were paid for by Citizens for Fiscal Responsibility, and were very similar to earlier postcards mailed and paid for by the Lower Valley Seniors.

"You don't have to get people to vote 'no' — all you have to do is confuse the issue," Henry said. "I don't agree with their tactics. Incorrect information was used to scare people — but it was effective."

Miller said he's happy with the election outcome and said educating voters on the costs paid off.

Miller defended the mention of "higher property taxes" on postcards mailed out to residents.

He claims if the recreation center operated at a deficit, funds would ultimately come from higher property taxes.

Yvonne Peterson is a member of the Senior Task Force, a group that favored building a community recreation center, with a senior section within it. Although the measure didn't pass, Peterson said she is not defeated.

“What we're going to do is regroup and come out with the truth on the tax facts,” Peterson said.

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