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Not much support for sales tax hike

Most Mecklenburg commissioners say the timing is bad, but one wants more discussion.

By APRIL BETHEA

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A majority of county commissioners said Wednesday they don't think now is the time to ask Mecklenburg voters to consider a quarter-cent hike to the local sales tax.

But as the county faces teacher layoffs, library closings and deep cuts to other services, commissioner

George Dunlap said the board should consider putting the issue before voters in November.

Dunlap, a Democrat, brought up the possibility at Tuesday's board meeting and wants the county board to discuss the tax on Aug. 3.

But seven other commissioners told the Observer on Wednesday they either won't support a higher sales tax or are leaning heavily against the idea.

"I think the last thing the taxpayers in Mecklenburg County need is another tax on them," said Republican Neil Cooksey. He said the county needs to live within its means.

Chair Jennifer Roberts, a Democrat, said she also is leaning against a referendum but wants to hear where the public stands.

At least one organization, the grassroots group Friends of Education, has come out in support of a referendum to reduce future cuts to schools.

Mecklenburg currently has a sales tax rate of 8.25 percent, the highest in the state.

A quarter-cent increase could raise about \$28 million a year, said Finance Director Dena Diorio. Under a state bill awaiting signature from Gov. Bev Perdue, the county could begin collecting money from a tax increase as soon as next April, if approved by voters in November.

SEE SALES TAX, 10A



Dunlap



Roberts

CHILLING IN THE HEAT



DAVID T. FOSTER III - dtfooster@charlotteobserver.com

Ian Simon, 6, relaxes under the fountain on The Green in uptown Charlotte. Simon and his mother were visiting from California in preparation for a move to Charlotte.

High temperatures baking Charlotte and East Coast

Charlotte and most of the Eastern seaboard continued to swelter Wednesday under oppressive heat. Charlotte hit 98 degrees - just two degrees shy of a record - and the heat sent smog levels higher. Smog levels in the Charlotte region have reached potentially unhealthy levels on 10 days this year, including Wednesday, compared to five such days for all of 2009. Highs will continue to be in the 90s today before tapering off a bit on Saturday.

Elsewhere around the country, heat-related deaths were reported in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Detroit. Records were shattered in New York, Philadelphia and Newark, N.J. Related stories on 3A and 1B



ALEX BRANDON - AP

Patty Wesel, 8, from Marietta, Ga., jumps in the spray of a sprinkler on the National Mall in front of the Washington Monument.

PHOTO GALLERY

More hot weather photos from around the world at charlotteobserver.com/photos

FAA looking into rash of close calls

Airliners in several cities, including Charlotte, involved in recent near-collisions.

By JOAN LOWY

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alarmed by a spate of near-collisions involving airliners, the government is trying to find out why air traffic controllers and pilots are making so many dangerous errors.

In recent months, there have been at least a half-dozen incidents in which airliners came close to colliding with other planes or helicopters - including in Charlotte, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, Burbank, Calif., and Anchorage, Alaska. In some cases, pilots made last-second changes in direction after cockpit alarms went off warning of an im-

pending crash.

"This spring we had several close calls that got everybody's attention, and I think that's the thing that really keyed us into taking a look at some of the risks, try to identify what we're missing," said Robert Tarter, vice president of the Federal Aviation Administration's Office of Safety-Air Traffic Organization. He was speaking to employees in a recent conference call launching the new safety effort.

At Charlotte/Douglas International Airport, there have been at least two such incidents in the last 18 months.

Just last week, a United Airlines flight waiting to land at Reagan National Airport near Washington came within less than a mile of a Gulfstream business jet that was climbing after taking off from another

SEE FAA, 9A

Lawmakers vote out video sweepstakes

Industry, pushing regulation and taxation, vows to continue battle despite 86-27 vote.

By BENJAMIN NIOLET AND MATT EHLERS

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RALEIGH — Thousands of state residents who enjoy clicking a virtual slot wheel or playing a hand of video poker in parlors and Internet cafes will have to find a new hobby.

On Wednesday, lawmakers voted to ban video sweepstakes parlors, rejecting arguments from industry supporters about the jobs, potential tax revenue and right to individual choice.

"This bill makes clear what our position is as to these enterprises. They are not wel-

come in North Carolina," said Rep. Melanie Wade Goodwin, a Rockingham Democrat, who called the industry a "cancer."

Players were not pleased. "They should be ashamed of themselves, taking away our little fun," said Annette Huggins, 53, who was clicking away inside a parlor behind a Starbucks in Raleigh on Wednesday night.

That particular brand of fun has been the cause of a long-running and stubborn battle. The ban would take effect Dec. 1, but the industry is not likely to go quietly. A previous attempt to ban sweepstakes machines was effectively undone by lawsuits. The sweepstakes games arose after the legislature banned video poker.

"We will look at all options

SEE SWEEPSTAKES, 9A

Cancellations chill hot concert time

Even popular groups call off their summer shows as empty wallets and more choices hurt ticket sales.

By THÉODEN JANES

Pop Culture Writer

The way things are going, the summer of 2010 might be remembered more for the concerts that *didn't* happen than the ones that actually did.

U2 and Christina Aguilera both postponed their U.S. tours. So did Limp Bizkit, which was to play Charlotte's Road Runner Mobile Amphitheatre this week. Santana at Verizon

Wireless Amphitheatre later this month? Axed. Sarah McLachlan's Lilith Tour in August? Not happening.

Even the Jonas Brothers, who sold 20,000 tickets here in 2009 and had one of the nation's hottest tours, bailed last week on plans to play a September show at Verizon.

Although promoters rarely admit postponements and cancellations are a result of poor sales, the struggling economy is a key factor. People have less money to spend, and there are more choices than ever.

When ticket sales for a particular show don't meet a particular level by a particular time, the plug can get pulled. Late last week, in a span of 14 hours, that's what happened with the Charlotte dates for the Lilith Tour and the Jonas Brothers.

"It seems like there are more cancellations this summer than most," says Glenn Peoples, an analyst at Billboard. "It's not like there's a single database that you can tally up all the cancellations and compare it to previous years. But the news that we've seen points to this being a worse problem than any typical year."

SEE CONCERTS, 10A



AP IMAGES FOR NICKELODEON

The Jonas Brothers perform at the 22nd Annual Kids' Choice Awards in March. But they won't be playing in Charlotte this summer.

98° 71°

Today: Mostly sunny skies.
Friday: Mostly sunny, with a chance of storms. 14A



ONLINE SPOTLIGHT

Join columnist Mark Washburn for a live online chat today at noon on charlotteobserver.com

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WELLS CUTS 3,800 U.S. JOBS

Wells Fargo & Co. said Wednesday that it's closing its 638 Wells Fargo Financial stores around the country and slashing 3,800 jobs in the unit. The bank also said it will stop originating subprime mortgage loans that it keeps in its own portfolio. 7A

Lake board backs off boat fees

The Mountain Island Lake Marine Commission will hold off on a hotly fought plan to impose boat fees and limit boat sizes on the region's major water supply. 1B



Suárez

Former Observer president dies

Roberto Suárez, a Cuban refugee who found freedom in the United States and success as a newspaper executive at The Charlotte Observer and Miami Herald, died Wednesday. 5B

Perdue stands by Highway Patrol chief

Gov. Bev Perdue, addressing behavioral problems at the N.C. Highway Patrol, said Wednesday she will have zero tolerance for troopers who drive drunk, have sex on duty or assault women. But she steadfastly stood by the troubled agency's commander. 4B

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