

THE JOURNAL RECORD

Opinion

Editorial: Despite flawed packaging, MAPS 3 must pass

December 2, 2009

The sales tax proposal on which Oklahoma City residents will vote Dec. 8 is like the one package that always appears under the tree Christmas morning, the one that's a great present wrapped in ugly paper with a poorly tied bow.

It will be the city's fourth sales tax proposal. The first MAPS, passed in 1993, raised \$363 million for capital improvements and took Oklahoma City from bombed-out, gritty cow town to Tier II destination. For that five-year, 1-cent sales tax, the city got the Bricktown canal, the AT&T Bricktown Ballpark, the Ford Center, the new downtown library, and renovations to the Civic Center Music Hall, the Cox Business Services Convention Center and State Fair Park. The city also got the trolleys for the transit system, the one component of the original MAPS package that didn't turn out to be a significant boost.

MAPS for Kids, the second Metropolitan Area Projects measure, was to raise \$470 million over seven years when it passed in 2001. That tax expired last year and was replaced by a short-term 1-cent sales tax to pay for Ford Center renovations that ultimately helped attract an NBA team.

In our book, that makes the city 3-0.

This time, the city and the chamber of commerce want \$777 million to come from a 1-cent sales tax that will last seven years, nine months. The money will pay for a 70-acre downtown park, health centers for seniors, hiking and bicycling trails, a new convention center, upgrades to the Oklahoma River rowing and kayaking site, sidewalks, improvements to State Fair Park, and a downtown area streetcar system.

Even after adjusting for inflation, the measure is by far the largest, most expensive MAPS proposal to date by about one-third.

Firefighter and police union members, most of whom do not live in Oklahoma City, mounted their opposition campaign merely as leverage for self-serving interests. It's not that they think the proposal is bad, they just want more political clout and more money, and they think that opposing a popular measure will provide leverage. That amounts to nothing more than schoolyard bullying.

The other opponents are self-proclaimed tea partiers who oppose new taxes no matter the purpose. All elections uncover the fringe; this one is no different, and the group's all-encompassing obstructionism has little credibility.

The only flaw in the MAPS 3 proposal is the packaging. The drafters of the ballot question intend to skirt a state law that forbids grouping projects into a single ballot measure. The law is meant to give voters a choice, a chance to say yes to streetcars but no to a convention center, for example. Rather than eight ballot questions, the sole

choice will be yes or no on \$777 million for unspecified capital improvements. The lone place those improvements are enumerated is in a resolution passed by the City Council in September. Only the thought of being drummed out of office by an angry mob would prevent current or future councilors from changing the projects set forth in the resolution, and in the event of a catastrophe that same mob will clamor to abandon the MAPS projects in favor of something more urgent.

Proponents see the packaging as a triviality and argue that the end justifies the means. Passage of MAPS 3 will continue the momentum launched 15 years ago, bring substantial private investment and improve the quality of life for Oklahoma City residents. It will accomplish all that with nary a nip in the pocketbook because the new tax merely replaces, without an increase, one that is set to expire.

We wish the present were wrapped a little neater and the bow tied a little tighter, but city leaders have demonstrated trustworthiness with previous MAPS initiatives, and citizen oversight, including a formal committee, will prevent any shenanigans.

Despite the untidiness, completion of the proposed projects will be like Dec. 26: The ribbons and bows will be forgotten, but the stuff inside the box will be beneficial for a long, long time.

Vote yes on Dec. 8.

Copyright © 2009 The Journal Record All Rights Reserved
101 N. Robinson Ave., Ste. 101, Oklahoma City, OK, 73102 |
P.O. Box 26370, Oklahoma City, OK, 73126-0370 | (405) 235-3100
415 S. Boston Ave., Ste. 101, Tulsa, OK 74103 | (918) 295-0098