Deaf Smith votes in favor of education

Tax to fund AC campus passes by 90 percent; Moore rejects new $10 million jail

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Saturday's election brought good news and bad news for a pair of area counties hoping to pass tax measures to fund local projects.

Voters in Deaf Smith County overwhelmingly passed a half-cent maintenance tax to fund an Amarillo College campus in Hereford while Moore County voters narrowly rejected a new $10 million jail.

The mood in Hereford was excited as officials looked forward to the new AC campus. Deaf Smith County Judge Tom Simons said the desire for the new campus is demonstrated by the fact that nearly 90 percent of voters cast their ballots in favor of the new tax.

"I thought it would pass, and I thought it would pass by a large margin, but not with 90 percent," Simons said. "I've run for office enough to know you don't get 90 percent for anything. I think it just shows how excited the people in our community are, how hungry they are for education."

The plan calls for the conversion of the old Shirley Elementary School - which was closed several years ago due to decreasing enrollment - into the AC branch, said Duffy McBryer, chairman of new branch's steering committee. Remodeling and new equipment for the former elementary school will cost about $80,000.

Classes will not start until the fall of 2005 to give the 5-cent maintenance tax time to accumulate funds and avoid the necessity of borrowing money to get the project going.

The centerpiece of the curriculum will be the core classes needed to complete the first two years of a four-year degree program, but the Hereford branch also will feature continuing education classes and leisure studies, McBryer said.

"The staff at AC is in the process right now of trying to get some input from people in Hereford about what type of leisure studies they would like to have," McBryer said. "What they have said is if you can get 10 people for a class, then they will find the instructor. If you've got 10 people who want to learn to flyfish, they'll find someone to teach them to flyfish."
The inclusion of core classes could prove to be a boon to the AC main campus as well as West Texas A&M University, according to AC officials. The idea is that by getting students in Hereford started on their educations, those students may complete either two-year degrees at AC or four-year degrees at WT, said J.R. Couser, dean of student services at AC.

The campus also helps AC meet a state mandate called Closing the Gaps, which calls for schools to reach out to underserved populations. With a large number of Hispanic and low-income potential students, Hereford could be a key entry point for an entire group of people who would not otherwise consider advanced schooling, Couser said.

"Obviously, when you look at folks where there are economic challenges, any hurdle that's in the way can really become an unsurmountable obstacle for people who are living in low economic status," Couser said. "Distance becomes a problem and so does access. This will hopefully remove another hurdle."

The mood among officials in Moore County on Monday was starkly different than their counterparts in Hereford, however.

Moore County Judge Kari Campbell said she wished she and her fellow commissioners could have gotten the word out to voters that the county is in desperate need of a new jail, which could have changed the fate of the bond issue that failed 668 to 510.

"Obviously we're disappointed," Campbell said. "I think maybe we as a commissioners court underestimated our ability to get the voters informed. From listening to some stories from election judges, a lot of people were not aware of the need."

The county commission has spent about $250,000 during the past year going through the planning stages for the new 148-bed jail. Campbell said the new jail was mandated by the growing population of Dumas, which is causing a growing population at the 62-bed jail.

Since 2003, the county has averaged four to six new inmates a day, forcing county officials to farm out as many as 16 prisoners to other counties at a cost of $40 a day per inmate. Campbell said the plan would have allowed Moore County to house all its inmates and bring in prisoners from other counties, making money for the county, rather than sending it to other counties.

The commission has made no official decision on where it will go with the jail, but Campbell said it is unlikely to waste all the time and money put into the plan so far.
"My personal take is that we've got a good chunk of money invested in this," Campbell said. "I think it might be in our best interest to organize a political action committee to help spread the word about this need. We've never done that before, but maybe we need to grab the bull by the horns.

"I know there are people out there who understand the need and want to see this go. They don't want to see their money go to another county."