

Record Tiger Bay Club crowd debates sales tax boost

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People ask questions about the health care sales tax referendum Thursday at the Manatee Tiger Bay Club meeting at Pier 22. GRANT JEFFERIES/Bradenton Herald

gjefferies@bradenton.com





By SARA KENNEDY — skennedy@bradenton.com

BRADENTON -- Organizers said the Tiger Bay Club drew a record crowd Thursday for a discussion focusing on whether the sales tax should be increased by a half-cent to finance health care for the poor.

A panel handled questions from the overflow crowd about the best way to finance indigent health care; why Manatee County set a June 18 referendum date instead of during a scheduled general election; and whether local doctors might volunteer to treat patients for free, as they did years ago.

Panelists included attorney Clifford Walters, managing partner at Blalock, Walters, P.A.; retired Dr. Richard Conard; and Dr. Scott Clulow, president of the Manatee County Medical Society.

Some of the overflow crowd of 126 sat at the press table at the Pier 22 Restaurant, where the nonpartisan Tiger Bay Club holds monthly discussions on hot topics.

The Manatee County Commission voted recently to ask voters to approve a half-cent sales tax increase to help pay for indigent health care when current funds run out in 2015. Until now, money generated from the sale of Manatee Memorial Hospital in 1984 has paid for care for the poor.

If voters approve, the sales tax would go up from 6.5 percent to 7 percent, generating an estimated \$23 million annually, part of which would also go toward property tax relief, officials have said.

In discussing the most equitable way to finance indigent health care, Clulow and Walters recommended the sales tax increase, while Conard advocated better identifying the problem and its true cost and finding an "enduring solution."

Asked why the county chose a special election date at "a strange time" in June that might mean a small turnout with all snowbirds absent, Walters said county officials are trying to prepare budgets and must have their plans "locked in" by early July.

Conard wondered why the issue was not dealt with sooner, and urged more study and "more transparency."

He said county residents should put their collective shoulders together and "solve it the Manatee way."

He recalled the "red card program" of many years ago, in which those who could not afford medical care got a red card that entitled them to see a local doctor who had volunteered to provide free care.

Manatee County Commissioner Carol Whitmore, a nurse who volunteers at a free clinic for the poor, was in the audience.

"I wish we could find doctors that would do this for nothing," she said.

Then she asked if local doctors might treat the poor for free, as they had done in the past.

"On a regular basis, it would be unsustainable," replied Clulow. "The majority of us already do."

Read more here: <http://www.bradenton.com/2013/05/03/4509818/the-tiger-bay-club-drew-a-record.html#storylink=cpy>