

Outdoors tax or not? You decide on Nov. 4

Voters will take up a proposed constitutional amendment that would raise the sales tax to fund the outdoors, the arts and clean water.

By [MARK BRUNSWICK](#), Star Tribune

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Minnesotans will be able to decide whether they want to increase the state's sales tax to help fund outdoor programs, the arts and the environment, legislators decided Thursday, the culmination of a 10-year battle among hunters, anglers, park lovers, and environmental and arts groups.

The November election ballot will include a proposal to raise the state sales tax by three-eighths of one percent under legislation the House and Senate passed on just the third day of the session.

If voters approve, the proposed amendment to the state constitution would eventually generate about \$276 million a year for groups as disparate as deer hunters and public TV.

The measure, which was reached in a process marked by almost unheard-of efficiency, would increase the sales tax on a \$10 purchase by about 3.8 cents.

A Minnesota family with a median income of \$56,000 a year would pay about an extra \$56 a year in sales taxes, according to Senate analysts.

Years in the making, the proposed amendment is a hybrid product of negotiations that began with hunters and anglers seeking funding to protect fish and wildlife habitat. It evolved to include environmental groups concerned about clean water, parks and trails supporters seeking to enhance their facilities, and finally arts groups that wanted to be included as part of the state's cultural legacy.

"It's making sure we have a long-term 25-year plan to make sure we have the resources in place, not just for our quality of life but for our kids and grandkids," said Majority Leader Tony Sertich, DFL-Chisholm, House author of the bill, during testimony in that chamber.

The House passed the bill 85-46. The Senate, which took it up shortly afterward, passed it 46-17.

Campaign launched

The amendment will add to an already crowded election season, setting in motion a huge public relations and marketing campaign to persuade voters of the value of the measure, which would raise the state's 6.5 percent sales tax to 6.875 percent.

Other recent campaigns promoting constitutional amendments cost as much as \$400,000 according to amendment backers, and this campaign is likely to equal or exceed that. It will also require a coalition of sometimes-competing factions to stick together.

"It's going to be a challenge for those of us who have pushed this constitutional amendment from the beginning to take it out to our constituencies," said Bob Lessard, a former state senator from International Falls who originally proposed dedicating funding to the outdoors alone.

"We're going to have to go to them and tell them why they should vote for this and why if we do not vote for this we're not going to be leaving a legacy for future generations. If we don't do our jobs and get the message out to our sportsmen and -women, it will be a travesty."

If the amendment is approved, it would dedicate an estimated \$54.5 million a year to the arts, \$91.1 million a year to the outdoors, \$39.3 million to parks and trails and \$91.1 million to a clean water fund, including at least \$4.5 million for drinking water programs.

Supporters must also work out how the money would be distributed within the groups, an issue they hope to settle during this legislative session. Hunters and anglers, in particular, have expressed concerns about who might control the money. Assuring those groups of who will be in charge will be essential in selling the amendment, said Garry Leaf, executive director for Sportsmen For Change, a group pushing it.

Additionally, the amendment could be one of several on the ballot in November, which could confuse voters and make them more inclined to pass by the ballot initiatives.

That could have consequences, because to be approved an amendment must receive a "yes" vote from a majority of all those voting in the general election, not just those voting on that proposal. Failure to vote on a constitutional proposal is counted as a "no" vote in Minnesota.

Opponents varied

Despite the strong bipartisan votes for the measure, debate against it Thursday focused on doubts about the wisdom of dedicating funding through the Constitution, and on concerns that voters might be too burdened to raise the sales tax. Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who has pledged to veto any tax increases, has no control over a proposed constitutional amendment.

Sen Tom Bakk, DFL-Cook, objected to the regressive effect of adding to the sales tax, which he said unfairly burdens low-income groups.

"It's not good tax policy, it's not good budgeting policy," he said.

Sen. Julianne Ortman, R-Chanhassen, said voters with already-strapped household finances should not be asked to support a sales tax increase.

"We are going to ask poor and unemployed and elderly Minnesotans to find more money out of their budget to subsidize arts programs, and trails and zoos?"

"Minnesotans out there are wondering what are they doing in St. Paul," she said.

Rep. Tom Hackbarth, R-Cedar, a supporter of one of the first versions of the measure, said he opposed the amendment now because it had grown into something that hunters, anglers and trappers would not support.

"This conglomeration of other groups that claim they have to be on this bill to get it passed, that's a bunch of baloney," Hackbarth said. He predicted the measure would fail, setting back efforts to protect the outdoors.

Earlier in the day, Hackbarth proposed legislation that aimed to provide money for sporting groups if the amendment fails. His plan would not raise the sales tax but would dedicate tax receipts from the sale of sporting goods to outdoor groups.

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