

MIXED RESULTS ON LOCAL MEASURES



Despite Governor Schwarzenegger's post-election claim that the November results proved that "people don't want to be taxed," a quick survey of local tax and bond measure results around the state presents a mixed picture.

Since Proposition 39 passed in 2000, local school bonds require only 55 percent approval. In November, nearly all of the school bonds on local ballots passed, providing about \$3.6 billion for local schools. A few bond measures for non-school purposes, such as a seismic safety measure for the San Francisco Bay Area BART rail system and a measure to clean up the storm water system in Los Angeles, reached the two-thirds vote needed for passage.

Other local measures did not fare as well, with only about a third approved. Most of these were taxes for special purposes, requiring a two-thirds vote for passage, and many of them garnered a majority vote but fell short of two-thirds. (Tax increases for general purpose spending require only a majority vote.)

A sales tax increase to fund law enforcement fell short in Los Angeles County with 60 percent support, while one in San Francisco to maintain general city programs fell well short of even a majority. New or extended sales taxes for transportation generally did better, passing in a number of counties.

Utility user taxes for general purposes were proposed in a number of cities, and nearly all the new proposals were rejected, although existing taxes were extended in a few cities. Parcel taxes had a similar success rate, with about a third of the proposed measures winning. Hotel and motel occupancy taxes, which are paid by out-of-towners, were considerably more popular with local voters; roughly half of those measures passed.

Differing local situations make it chancy to draw overall conclusions from these results. However, voters seem to prefer taxes for designated purposes rather than those for which spending will be determined by their elected representatives.

Looking at the overall picture of state and local tax measures, one might speculate that most voters were willing to support taxes they didn't expect to pay, such as the state tax on the highest income taxpayers for mental health services and the local hotel taxes, but not the state phone tax for emergency medical service or local utility taxes they were certain to pay.