

GOP plan to swap property tax cuts for sales tax increases blocked

By Ty Tagami

Capitol Beat News Service

For a second time this year, Democrats in the Georgia House rejected a Republican plan to reduce homeowner property tax bills. The Democrats' ar-

gument was unchanged from their refusal to support a similar GOP tax plan earlier this year: a sales tax to subsidize homeowner property tax bills would have raised prices on everyone for everyday necessities, from baby formula to school supplies.

"The no-vote today is a vote for no new taxes," said Rep. Tanya Miller, D-Atlanta, on Saturday, the third day of a special session. She called the Republican proposal, which would have let 67 communities put a 1% sales tax on the ballot, a "bait and switch."

Republicans contended that fast-rising property tax bills have become unaffordable and that their approach would have helped.

A penny-on-the-dollar sales tax would have saved homeowners in Gwinnett County \$250 million and homeowners in Forsyth County at least \$60 million, said Rep. Shaw Blackmon, R-Bonaire, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.

It is "the kind of relief that could have helped some residents stay in the homes they own," he said.

Blackmon was in charge of crafting the chamber's approach to

affordability during an election year when the issue is a top concern.

During the regular session, he had proposed House Resolution 1114, which would have put a constitutional amendment on the ballot statewide asking voters if they wanted to pay more in sales tax so homeowners could pay less in property tax.

Republicans have a majority in the House and Senate, but constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority. Democrats rejected HR 1114.

Then, in the waning hours of that regular session, the Senate devised Senate Bill 33, which splintered the same idea into local votes by each community. The bill passed because it did not require a two-thirds majority, and Gov. Brian Kemp signed it into law in May.

Kemp then called lawmakers back to the Capitol to deal with lingering election issues and added the local sales tax question to their agenda.

The catch: although SB 33 did not require a two-thirds majority, each local bill it authorized did. Democrats remained opposed on Saturday when local legislative delegations brought their

measures to a vote as a package in the House.

There were only three such measures in the Senate, and Democrats there denied each one a two-thirds majority, as well.

The sales taxes would have driven up costs for shoppers, Senate Minority Whip Kim Jackson, D-Stone Mountain, said after the vote. "Whereas only those who are lucky enough to afford a house will see any relief," she said.

Republicans had pointed out that tourists pay sales taxes too. They did not point out, however, that the revenue would have subsidized only the local government portion of the tax bill and not the school portion, which is typically the largest share.

The disagreement promises to be a potent election year issue.

Democrats will argue that the scheme was ille-

gal from the start.

Miller, one of the Democrats who spoke against the measure in the House, is her party's nominee for state attorney general. She argued after the vote that as a product of the Senate, SB 33 was unconstitutional because tax legislation must originate in the House.

But Republicans contended that Kemp signed it, so it's legal. And Rep. Scott Hilton, R-Peachtree Corners, said the Democratic Party "deep down knows" the sales taxes would have been popular among voters if the measures had appeared on their ballots.

"But voters are being denied that chance right now. Denied the chance to have a more affordable life, to be able to afford their home, to stay in their homes," he said. "Today, Democrats have denied that chance."

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