

CLEVELAND, Ohio — A state lawmaker wants to change how requests to hike local property taxes or renew existing ones are presented on the ballot to Ohio voters.

DEREK MERRIN

Under _____, a Lucas County Republican, all ballot language describing requests to approve property-tax levies would be required to:

* Describe the amount someone would pay per \$100,000 of a property's fair market value.

Currently, ballot issues describe the effect on \$100 of taxable value. In Ohio, taxable value is 35 percent of a property's market value.

In other words, under current law, a ballot request for a 1-mill tax hike would describe a tax increase of 10 cents per \$100 in taxable value. The proposed law would describe it as \$35 per \$100,000 in market value, which is the amount in new taxes the owner of a home worth \$100,000 actually would pay.

* Describe the total estimated amount of money the tax issue would raise annually. Currently, only some types of levies are required to do this.

* Be written in the same-size font in plain type. Currently, a levy's purpose in some cases is required to be written in bold font that's at least twice the size of the rest of the text.

The change in font sizes, Merrin said, is distracting, and makes the process less fair.

Merrin said his bill's overall goal is to increase transparency in the process of seeking property tax increases or renewals. Many voters don't understand what mills are, or how taxable value relates to a property's actual value, he said.

"You shouldn't need to bring a calculator to vote. And currently, you have to bring a calculator and have a knowledge of the Ohio Revised Code to understand how these levies impact voters," he said.

But public school officials have opposed a similar proposal from Merrin in the past. A version of that bill, _____ but not the state senate last year, only included the requirement that property tax levies be described by their impact on \$100,000 of a property's market value.

Barbara Shaner, a lobbyist for the professional association that represents public school administrators, said Merrin's proposed language doesn't capture the complexities of how property taxes are calculated, like tax rollbacks or the differences in how residential, agriculture and commercial properties are valued.

"We feel like in a way, it's less than transparent because it's not something that you can make a simple calculation on," she said.

Another reality of Merrin's bill — it would, by definition, make higher dollar figures appear on the ballot for levy requests than the status quo. That may cause voters to be less likely to vote for the levy, Shaner acknowledged.

“Districts try to be very transparent when there’s a levy on the ballot,” she said. “We think the current process allows voters to obtain that information ahead of time.”

Merrin said that’s not the goal of his legislation.

“I don’t think it’s going to make a huge difference in the outcome of whether a levy passes or fails. But we have an obligation to accurately and clearly communicate to the voters about the levies that they’re voting on,” he said.

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