

Two supervisors speak out against local fuel tax proposal

By Eric Miller
Editor

SPARTA—A proposal for a 2.1 percent local fuel tax received criticism from two members of the Caroline County Board of Supervisors during a constituents meeting on Nov. 21.

Supervisors Jeff Sili and Jeff Black met with more than 100 county residents of the Bowling Green Voting District at Salem Baptist Church.

In May, supervisors voted 5-1 at their regular meeting to direct the county staff to study the possibility of Caroline County joining the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission (PRTC). Sili cast the dissenting vote. Joining the regional transportation panel would mean Caroline would impose a local 2.1 percent fuel tax to generate revenue for transportation projects.

The PRTC is a joint governmental entity formed under the State Transportation District Act of 1964. The commission provides a regional approach to the planning, development and funding of transportation systems, programs and facilities, including highway improvements, in the participating localities.

Black made a PowerPoint presentation at the Nov. 21 meeting to show that a local fuel tax could drive business away from Caroline gas stations. The tax would apply to gasoline and diesel fuels in Caroline. As Black made the presentation, Sili stood nearby and helped present some of the information.

Black said the price of diesel is \$3.64 a gallon in Carmel Church and in Emporia. However, if Caroline had the 2.1 percent tax, that price would increase to \$3.71 or \$3.72. A tractor trailer fuel tank holds 100 gallons, and buying diesel in Emporia rather than Caroline County would save the trucking company \$7 to \$8 on a 100 gallon fill-up. Buying 200 gallons in Emporia would save \$14 to \$16.

“A company with 10 trucks would save \$70 to \$160” by filling up in Emporia, Black noted. “They will go where diesel is cheapest.”

Nearly 88 million gallons of diesel and gasoline were sold in Caroline County in 2012.

Black told the gathering that he had received dozens of emails against the fuel tax and only one in favor of it.

“The truck industry is one of the major industries in Caroline County,” Black said. “You might step on toes if you pass a fuel tax.”

The PRTC members already include the counties of Prince William, Stafford and Spotsylvania and the cities of Manassas, Manassas Park and Fredericksburg.

The PRTC has a 17-member board made up of 13 elected officials from the six member jurisdictions, as well as a state senator and two delegates, and one representative from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

Caroline would have to make one yearly payment of \$107,000 to \$150,000 to the Virginia Railway Express, a 90-mile service that has a Fredericksburg line and a Manassas line to Union Station in Washington, D.C.

Caroline has 86 residents who commute to job via the VRE. “That would cost us \$1,700 a year per rider,” Black said. Caroline also has nine van pools and seven car pools that travel to the D.C. area each day, according to the George Washington Regional Commission.

Another drawback of PRTC is that the number of voting representatives on the board is based on a county's population, Black said. With Caroline's population at only 28,000, it would have only one board member, while other county's have more than one member.

"When you add a tax, the state looks at that as more income to the county, and you would see a reduction in the amount the state gives to the county," Black said. Caroline schools might also receive less state money.

A study by the Weldon Cooper Center said Caroline's population was 28,500 in 2010 and is expected to increase to 31,400 by 2020; 33,400 by 2030 and 35,300 by 2040. Caroline has an average of 50 residents per square mile, while Spotsylvania County has 300, Fredericksburg has 1,800 and Manassas has 3,800.

In recent years, Caroline obtained federal grants that were used to create parking spaces for commuters in Ladysmith. He said he can increase the number of spaces if necessary.

Supervisors considered joining the PRTC around 2005. Supervisor Wayne Acors prompted the board to revisit the question of joining the PRTC this year.

Revenue from a gasoline tax could be used to help pay to widen Ladysmith Road and other projects, such as paving some dirt roads and buying school buses, Acors has said. The revenue also could be used for bicycle trails, street signs, traffic signals, sidewalks, commuter parking lots, widening or improving major secondary roads or multi-lane roads, and establishing a commuter rail station.