

Protective Services levy passes, to be in effect 10 years

By JOE ARNOLD

The Eagle-Gazette Staff

jarnold@nncogannett.com

Thursday, March 6, 2008

LANCASTER - The cold wind and rain that pelted the group of Issue 12 supporters gathered at East Sixth Avenue and Pleasantville Road on Tuesday evening was a small price to pay for a much larger cause.

The Protective Services measure, a 10-year, 1-mill operating levy put on Tuesday's ballot by the Fairfield County Department of Job & Family Services, passed by a vote of 53 percent to 47 percent, according to unofficial results released by the Fairfield County Elections Office. These results do not include paper and provisional ballots.

Simply put, the agency's ability to continue to provide abuse protection to Fairfield County's children and elderly will continue. "I've been working for about 25 years with abused children and elderly in Fairfield County," said Mike Orlando, the agency's executive director. "I was very confident that when the voters learned about this crisis, they would stand up and speak out for the children and the elderly who aren't able to speak for themselves.

"I feel blessed to live in this community."

The 1-mill property tax will be in effect for 10 years. A homeowner with property value listed at \$100,000 will pay \$30.72 per year. Annual revenues from the tax will be more than \$2.4 million.

The ballot issue sought to keep pace with the dramatic rise in both child and adult protective cases in the county. The number of calls to the agency regarding child protective cases has skyrocketed in the past seven years. In 2000, the agency received 1,869 calls and was able to investigate 1,278 of them. In 2007, the county was only able to investigate 1,802 of the 4,410 calls it received.

"For us, it demonstrates that once again that residents of Fairfield County want this to be a place in which families, and children and elderly are held very dearly and with deep regard," said Rich Bowlen, director of Child Protective Services. "It is a pleasure to know that the voters have placed their trust in us. What we want to do is offer the community a promise that we're going to continue to work hard to earn and keep their trust."

Job & Family Services currently is capable of investigating 40 percent of the abuse cases reported to the agency. Orlando has said the ideal figure should be 70 percent.

Statistics don't deviate much concerning elderly protection. Calls to Adult Protective Services jumped from 232 in 2000 to 618 in 2007.

Adult Protective Services largely has been funded by a Social Services Block Grant, but the \$262,000 annual stipend from the federal government expired this past year. The division faced elimination had the ballot issue failed.

Orlando said preliminary studies commissioned by the agency showed 5 percent of levies put on the ballot in Fairfield County typically fail on the first attempt. The lengthy campaign to get word out of the levy and its beneficiaries fell directly into the laps of volunteers like the ones camped out in the rain Tuesday.

"When you're out working on a campaign like there, and it's goal is to protect children and elderly, it's easy for people to get excited and passionate about it," he said.