

Bottle tax fails to win enough support

By Julie Scharper, *The Baltimore Sun*, June 18, 2010

A four-cent tax on bottled beverages that could have prevented scores of city workers from losing their jobs was defeated Thursday at an emergency meeting of the Baltimore City Council.

Without the tax — the centerpiece of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's package of new fees and tariffs to help bridge the city's \$121 million budget gap — the city plans to scale back street cleaning, graffiti removal and maintenance of vacant properties, among other services.

Supporters hold out the slim hope of resurrecting the measure before June 30, the deadline for officials to settle the city's budget for the coming fiscal year. If a council member who voted against the tax can be persuaded to flip, a new vote could be held as soon as Monday.

In a dramatic session, the 15-member council split 7-7 on the tax, short of the majority needed for passage. Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young recused himself from the vote because, he said, his cousin is a lobbyist for a beverage distributor.

Before the vote, attention focused on the last two council members to declare their positions. The votes of both Councilmen Warren Branch and Carl Stokes were needed for the measure to pass.

Stokes, who had said Wednesday he was leaning against the bottle tax, voted for it on Thursday. But Branch, one of the most reticent members of the legislative body, cast a surprise vote against it.

City Hall observers had expected Branch, a 23-year veteran of the Public Works Department, to back the tariff because it would have saved the jobs of 50 of his former colleagues.

But Branch said that he based his decision on feedback from his constituents, who, he said, called and sent e-mails opposing the tax. About 100 residents told him they opposed the tax, more than three times those who supported it, he said. He was unable to provide the list to a reporter Thursday night.

"If it were up to me, I would have voted for it," said Branch, whose district is home to a large Coca-Cola bottling plant. "But the voice of my constituents spoke."

Supporters of the tax were visibly despondent following Branch's announcement. In an e-mailed statement, Rawlings-Blake called the decision "a win for the wealthy lobbyists against the working people of this City."

Similar measures were defeated in Washington and Philadelphia this year following extensive lobbying from the beverage industry.

Councilman William H. Cole IV said that loss of services would have a pronounced negative effect on neighborhoods. "There's just no revenue," he said. "It's not like [Rawlings-Blake] has got some other pot of money out there."

Store owners were jubilant over the defeat on the tax, which they said would have caused them to lose customers to the surrounding counties.

Speaking with reporters after the vote, Rob Santoni, chief financial officer of Southeast Baltimore's Santoni's Market, was overcome by emotion. He said the tax would have caused sales to slump, forcing store owners to lay off employees.

"We had a lot to lose," he said. He estimated that more than 300 retail workers across the city would have lost their jobs.

But AFSCME chief Glennard Middleton, whose union represents the city's blue-collar workers, said that he would have to tell workers that they were losing jobs due to the council's decision.

"This is about citizens, workers who live here," he said. "The council sided with big money."

Earlier Thursday, at a luncheon work session fraught with heated exchanges over the tax, Branch asked whether the vote could be delayed until after a hearing on public works layoffs scheduled before his labor subcommittee today.

Council members needled Young at the luncheon about abstaining from the vote, questioning whether a cousin was a close enough relation to constitute a conflict of interest. Young said he wanted to avoid any appearance of impropriety after his cousin had lobbied prominently on the issue.