

PHOTOS: 147,000 pennies headed to capital in support of 1 percent sales tax increase for education

By LESLIE WILLIAMS

Originally published 07:06 p.m., March 16, 2009

Updated 07:06 p.m., March 16, 2009

NAPLES — Moving 500 pounds of pennies might sound messy.

But it's not, if you're organized.

And if Southwest Florida's teachers and education advocates are doing anything, they are getting organized.

It is all in the name of public education, as teachers' union officials from Collier and Lee counties get more than 125,000 pennies ready to go to Tallahassee for a Wednesday rally to implore legislators to pass a one-cent sales tax to fund education. Each of those pennies represents a student in the two counties' public schools.

On Monday, Teachers Association of Lee County President Mark Castellano stood beside a small mountain of storage bins, each filled with neatly bagged pennies, to say Lee County had surpassed its goal. For the 78,000 students in the county, 100,000 pennies were collected.

"Never have our state's children needed good leadership more than now," Castellano said. "Isn't the education of our state's children worth a penny?"

The penny sales tax was introduced by state Rep. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami, who is predicting it will generate \$10.5 billion over the next three years before it sunsets.

"I certainly hope that the Legislature takes it very seriously," said Lee County Superintendent James Browder. "That one penny will help balance this economy; \$3.5 billion will be raised in bad economic times."

But bad economic times may prove to be a hindrance to the passage of the bill, which would raise Florida's sales tax to 7 percent from 6 percent.

"Probably, (people) aren't going to care for it unless they know teachers or have grandchildren," said Jennifer Dewitt, the mother of a Spring Creek Elementary School student. "It sounds so cliché, but children are the future and if we don't educate them now and give them resources, we're going to pay for it later."

Dewitt, whose 9-year-old daughter is in third grade, said she would allow her taxes to double if it would benefit education.

"One percent doesn't seem like a lot," said Dewitt. "It's not going to effect my household a lot. We're talking about pennies; on \$100, that's just \$1."

After the Wednesday rally in Tallahassee, the 2.6 million pennies expected will be donated to the Children's Home Society of Florida, which helps abused, abandoned and homeless children in the state.

After Collier County's contribution of 47,000 pennies, delivered to the Teacher Association of Lee County

offices Monday, more than 140,000 pennies will be loaded into Bob Rushlow's truck to make the trip. Rushlow, president of the Support Personnel Association of Lee County, represents the county's custodians, bus drivers and lunchroom workers, whose jobs are equally imperilled by budget cuts. Browder has warned that layoffs of up to 1,000 staff members could be coming next year if the legislature makes proposed cuts to education.

Proposed cuts are so drastic in Florida that funding levels may not meet 2005-06 levels, which could preclude Florida from receiving federal stimulus funds.

"It's terrible when the state of Florida doesn't even qualify for the federal stimulus package," said Rushlow. "These pennies represent our children. The children are speaking to our legislators."

© Marco News