

College officials eyeing future without needed bond money

By SUSAN WOODY
News Herald Staff Writer

Burke County voters rejected a \$9 million construction bond referendum for Western Piedmont Community College on Tuesday by a 3,190 to 2,617, or 55 percent to 45 percent, margin.

"When you pass a bond, you have to have your friends out voting," WPCC President Jim Richardson said this morning. "A lot of our friends did not get out to vote."

On a primary election day which saw Republican and unaffiliated voters nearly equal the Democratic turnout, the mood of Burke County voters may have made the bond an especially hard sale, said Republican County Commission nominee J.R. Simpson, a former member of the WPCC Board of Trustees.

Burke County has 21,344 registered Democrats, 14,446 registered Republicans and 3,494 voters who affiliate with neither party. Unaffiliated voters can, however, vote in

the Republican primary. In all, 14.7 percent, or 5,787 of the county's 39,284 registered voters, voted on the bond.

Those Republican and unaffiliated voters turned out of office Burke County Commission Chairman Larry Huffman in large part due to his support for the new Burke County Jail, Simpson said.

"Unfortunately, one reason the Western Piedmont bond failed was a backlash (to the jail)," Simpson said. "All day, people told me at the polls that their taxes were too high already."

If approved, the bond would have likely raised county property taxes by at least 3 cents per \$100 valuation, according to county officials.

Other contributors to the bonds' failure may have been the county's property revaluation this year, coupled with the uncertainty over what the commission will set as its tax rate, Simpson added.

"Anytime you have a bond issue

coming on the heels of a property revaluation and before the tax rate is set you have the very worst possible conditions to take a bond issue to the people," Simpson said.

The proposed bond referendum came as a request to the county commissioners late last year from the college's board of trustees. WPCC officials wanted to use the bond money to renovate existing facilities on the college's campus, build new classroom space and bring the college up to standards with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"We're 30 years old," Richardson said, "we desperately need the renovations."

Despite the voters' rejection of the college's plan, Richardson and other college officials are not letting the failed bond get them down.

"We'll still remain a great institution," Richardson said. "You'll still see quality programs and quali-

Please turn to Page 15

ty instruction, just on a limited basis."

Richardson said college officials will regroup and make decisions about how to move into the future and offer a quality education for the people in Burke County.

"We'll still get our new business technology building," he said.

Most of the money for construction of that building is coming from a state bond which voters statewide approved last November.

But to receive the money, WPCC has to provide \$800,000 in matching funds.

The college was going to use some of the local bond money to match the state bond money.

With the failure of the bond, Richardson said the county commissioners are likely to provide the matching amount.

Tuesday's bond vote was only the second in the college's 30-year history.

The first bond was approved in 1964, when the college was first getting started.

Explaining why the 1994 bond vote failed, Richardson said he thinks a lot of voters in Burke County are concerned about taxes and government spending.

A lot of people had to pay higher taxes on their homes this year and pay more income taxes, Richardson said.

Otto Woerner, co-chairman of the bond campaign, said he has also heard comments from people who are concerned with paying higher taxes.

Woerner said he is concerned the campaign committee did not explain the importance of the bond very well.

"It appears to me we just didn't have the turnout we needed," said Richard Whisenant, co-chairman of the bond campaign.

Too, the rainy weather probably

deterred a lot of people from coming out to vote, he explained.

Higher taxes and rainy weather could have prevented people from voting but Fred Whalen, chairman of the WPCC Board of Trustees, said the newly constructed county jail and its accompanying debt service could be on the minds of voters as well.

Whalen said the board of trustees at WPCC will look again at the whole issue of improving the college and offering more programs.

"We were pretty positive," Whalen said referring to the bond. "We felt it would pass."