

Group lobbies against hike in sales tax

By Kelly Hawes | Posted: Wednesday, March 22, 2006 11:00 pm

A federation of Galveston County churches is working to influence the way the state decides to pay for public schools.

Galveston County Interfaith an organization made up of 15 county churches sent six representatives to testify before the Texas Tax Reform Commission in Houston this month. Galveston resident Laura Murrell was part of the delegation.

"Our position has been clear" she said. "Increasing the sales tax isn't fair to low-income families."

Murrell is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Galveston County but the group also includes Catholics and Protestants Muslims and Jews.

Galveston County Interfaith is part of the Industrial Areas Foundation a national organization with affiliates in 21 states. The foundation's affiliates in Texas have been represented at each of the 16 meetings held so far by the tax reform commission.

The commission headed by former Comptroller John Sharp is scheduled to issue its recommendations in advance of a special legislative session set to start next month.

The session comes in response to a ruling last year by the Texas Supreme Court. The court tossed out the state's school finance system saying it amounted to a statewide sales tax something that is prohibited by the state constitution.

"We think we're having an impact" Murrell said. "We're being told that the commission will not recommend a sales tax increase."

That's not bad considering that the effort didn't really begin until December.

"It's really pretty amazing for a little grassroots organization" Murrell said.

Of course what the commission recommends and what the Legislature decides to do might well be two different things.

Murrell said Galveston County Interfaith was calling on its member congregations to contact their legislators.

"We're issuing a call to action" she said.

The Industrial Areas Foundation notes that 20 years ago the state paid 55 percent of the cost of public schools. That share is now down to 34 percent.

”The current system places a totally unconscionable burden on low income families” Murrell said.

For a family of four earning less than \$22000 a year she said the state and local tax burden amounts to 14.2 percent. For a family of four earning more than \$100000 the burden drops to 5.1 percent.

”Using an increase in the sales tax to buy down property tax decreases will just make the tax system even more regressive” Murrell said.