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Judge removes tax reference from Sea Isle referendum

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Published: Saturday, September 23, 2006

By BRIAN IANIERI
SEA ISLE CITY — A change-of-government ballot question will not include references to a tax hike, a Superior Court judge ruled Friday.
A Sea Isle City group opposed the way city officials presented a referendum and an interpretive statement that will appear on ballots Nov. 7.
John Fee, one of the petition's leaders, said the wording incorrectly linked the question to an automatic increase in taxes.
Last week, he sought a ruling in Superior Court.
Judge Valerie Armstrong eliminated two sentences from the public question that referenced a city-estimated 1.34-cent tax-rate increase if voters approved the change of government.

Earlier this week, both the city and the group, informally called the Petition Committee, had compromised on several other issues relating to wording on the referendum.
"We're not trying to hide any costs, but we don't think the vote for the form of government is a vote for a tax increase," said Fee, an unsuccessful candidate for City Commission last year. "That was the primary reason for going to court, and we're happy with the outcome."
Fee and a group of others in Sea Isle City led a petition drive to change the form of government, creating a five-member council and a directly elected mayor instead of a three-member commission.
City Solicitor Paul Baldini said the city will not challenge the judge's ruling.
But he defended the wording on the referendum.
"As the solicitor for the town, I think it was fair the public have a sense of the cost of the program they're being asked to vote on," Baldini said.
The petition itself was controversial.
It drew criticism from city officials, who saw it as an effort to take control of the government from people upset by last year's City Commission election, in which all three incumbents won.
Two weeks ago, when the city approved the ballot question, Fee was angered by the way the question would have been presented.
It included references to the salaries of a business administrator and additional lawyer and was estimated at as much as \$475,000 per year for all additional officials.
Fee has said the estimated costs are much less, and that the expense could be offset by more efficient government operations.
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