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## Property tax, school voucher ballot items struck

By BILL KACZOR The Associated Press

The Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE -- One ballot proposal that would trade a huge property-tax cut for other tax increases and two others designed to expand school voucher programs were removed from the Nov. 4 ballot Wednesday by the Florida Supreme Court.

The removal of the property-tax amendment proposal is good news for Keys schools, because the Monroe County school district receives the bulk of its funding through local property taxes. The Monroe County School Board recently came out publicly against the amendments.

"I'm ecstatic that all three are gone," School Board member Andy Griffiths said Wednesday. "They were bad for Florida and bad for public education."

The seven justices were unanimous in both cases. All three proposals were offered by the state Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, which meets once every 20 years. The justices ruled quickly because Friday is the deadline for finalizing the ballot.

The high court affirmed Circuit Judge John C. Cooper's decision to remove proposed Amendment 5, the tax swap, after he found its title and ballot summary were misleading. The justices, though, reversed a separate decision by Cooper, of Tallahassee, to keep the two proposed voucher amendments on the ballot.

Amendments 7 and 9, if voted in, would have undone court rulings that struck down former Gov. Jeb Bush's voucher program. Bush's program had let students from failing public schools go to private schools at taxpayer expense.

Amendment 7 also would have repealed a provision that bars state financial aid to churches and other religious organizations. The statewide teachers union opposed all three proposed amendments partly on grounds they were deceptive.

Amendment 5 would have removed local tax revenue for the Monroe County school system -- most of the school district's tax revenue, said Griffiths of the Monroe County School Board.

"It also means we would have to depend on the Legislature to replace that [money]. It's also unfriendly to business, because it taxes charter boats, lawyers, hairdressers and other businesses that aren't taxed."

Griffiths owns a fishing charter business based on Stock Island. But he's raved against Amendment 5 since it was proposed, arguing that it would cripple the school budget.

"No one was going to trust the Legislature to replace that lost money from local taxes in the Keys," he said.

The Florida Education Association's attorney, Ron Meyer, argued that the commission exceeded its authority by offering proposals that dealt neither with taxation nor the "state budgetary process."

Citizen staffer John Guerra contributed to this report.

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