



October 10, 2003

Archive...

[Site map](#) | [Help!](#)

| |
|------------------------------|
| NEWS |
| Local / State |
| National / International |
| Editorials / Letters / Forum |
| Columnists |
| Weather |
| Obituaries |
| Faith & Values |
| Special Reports |
| SPORTS |
| OSU Football |
| OSU Men's Basketball |
| OSU Women's Basketball |
| Other OSU Sports |
| Crew |
| Reds |
| Bengals |
| Auto racing |
| Preps |
| Clippers |
| Blue Jackets |
| Indians |
| Browns |
| Cavaliers |
| Golf |
| Outdoors |
| BUSINESS |
| Stocks |
| Personal finance |
| Connect: Technology |
| ACCENT/ARTS |
| WeekEnd: Movies, more |
| Travel |
| Home & Garden |
| NOW! for kids |
| USA Weekend |
| Horoscopes |
| Crosswords |
| SERVICES |
| Register / Sign In |
| My Account |
| Web FAQs |
| Subscribe to the paper |
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| Other sites |
| Newspaper in Education |
| Sponsored events |
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► Local/State News

Taft's high-tech jobs plan meets resistance

Farm lobby against ballot issue to fund Third Frontier idea

Friday, October 10, 2003

Jeffrey Sheban
 THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

It's been a rough week for State Issue 1, the final piece of Gov. Bob Taft's \$1.6 billion Third Frontier initiative for high-tech research and work-force development.

Two public-policy groups yesterday raised cautions about committing state tax dollars to chasing the promise of the new economy, while a trade group for the state's No. 1 industry said there are better ways to spend the \$500 million that Issue 1 would raise from bond sales over 10 years.

The Ohio Farm Bureau Federation — which has 200,000 members — on Wednesday became the first major organization to oppose the measure.

Finally, a poll yesterday showed Ohioans have mixed feelings about the issue: 35 percent favor it, 31 percent oppose and 34 percent don't know.

Thomas C. Sawyer, president of Opinion Strategies — the firm that conducted the telephone survey Sept. 19-30 — said many respondents did not have a clue about Third Frontier. Even when the issue was explained, the support did not increase, he said.

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Taft, the main backer of the proposal, also did not fare well in the poll, with only 38 percent rating his performance at excellent or good. The General Assembly did not do much better, earning a positive rating from 42 percent. The poll's margin of error was plus or minus 4 percentage points.

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Despite all that, Issue 1 backers have broad-based support from business, labor and education groups, and are about to unleash a \$3 million ad campaign to convince voters by Nov. 4 that Ohio's future is in the knowledge economy.

"I think the cautions are things we've talked about in the past," said Brian K. Hicks, Taft's former chief of staff who's running the Issue 1 campaign.

"The state of Ohio cannot do nothing. We cannot endure the status quo," he said.

Policy Matters Ohio is a think tank based in Cleveland partially funded by labor organizations. It took no position on Issue 1 yesterday, but it did raise questions about the changes the constitutional amendment would make.

Issue 1 would broaden the ability of the state, universities and local governments to issue bonds for research, development and technology commercialization. It also would let state and local governments use other forms of revenue, not just bond proceeds, to assist private companies with research and commercialization.

Extending the "full faith and credit" of the state's bond program to high-tech ventures isn't without risk, because of the obligation to pay the debts regardless of fiscal conditions.

"Meeting these obligations may come at the expense of social services, education and other discretionary programs," the report said.

The Ohio Public Expenditure Council also weighed in, cautioning the investment in hightech could be squandered unless Ohio's work force is prepared for the new jobs.

"This means a commitment on the part of the educational community to continuous improvement" so students can step into the higher-paying, more-demanding jobs envisioned by Issue 1, said the nonprofit group funded mainly by business groups.

Ohio's farmers think Issue 1 leaves agriculture behind, Scott Williams, a lobbyist for the Farm Bureau told the Associated Press.

"Agriculture is referred to as the first frontier, manufacturing as the second and this as the third," he said. "We certainly don't see that the governor has included us in his effort."

The group said a better way to attract new industries is to improve business conditions by reforming taxes and limiting frivolous lawsuits.

Hicks said Taft was doing all that.

The policy groups had good things to say about Issue 1, too.

The expenditure council estimated the ballot issue would create 30,000 jobs, part of the entire Third Frontier total of 96,000 jobs.

The group's president, Rick Yokum, said the average pay would be \$55,000 a year, well above Ohio's current average salary of \$33,000.

He called the Third Frontier a "well-thought-out undertaking."

Zach Schiller, research director for Policy Matters, said, "I certainly applaud efforts to find an appropriate government role to see that our economy flourishes."

Dispatch Public Affairs Editor Darrel Rowland contributed to this story.

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