

Tax increase to fund universal preschool expected to reach ballot in 2016

May 21, 2015, 2:55pm EDT **Updated** May 21, 2015, 3:05pm EDT

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Cincinnati Business Courier

A tax to fund universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds is expected to be before Cincinnati-area voters in 2016, but a high-profile group of nonprofit, religious, government and business leaders have yet to decide upon which ballot to try to put it.

[Greg Landsman](#) – the executive director of the Strive Partnership, the nonprofit group dedicated toward improving educational performance by students in the region’s urban core – said leaders are still working out whether the Preschool Promise should be a program within the city of Cincinnati only or all of Hamilton County.

That’s a key question not only because of how many more children would go to preschool if the program is countywide instead of citywide but because of the political considerations, including:

- The voters who turn out in presidential election years tend to be more progressive and Democratic-leaning, particularly within the city of Cincinnati, and more likely to approve a tax increase for such a program.
- Voters could be asked to approve two general tax increases in 2016. Board members of the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority are mulling a countywide, 0.25 percentage point sales tax increase to fund better bus service within the county and connect people better to available jobs. Two countywide sales taxes could face resistance amongst Hamilton County voters, who have approved only one countywide sales tax – a 0.25 percentage point sales tax increase to fund a rehabilitation of Union Terminal in 2014 – since the now-widely reviled stadium sales tax increase of 1996.
- If, on the other hand, Preschool Promise backers seek only a city income tax increase (the city does not levy a sales tax), it could be a wash for city voters’ pocketbooks if SORTA’s sales tax is approved. SORTA is funded by a 0.3-percentage-point city income tax, a tax SORTA could seek to end if county voters provide it with a new revenue source.
- Preschool Promise backers also could ask for a property tax increase at the city or county level, the traditional method for funding education in Ohio, but property taxes are considered the least popular type of tax levied on the public.

On Thursday, the initiative announced a group of 33 public, private and nonprofit leaders to serve on a steering committee to determine what the program’s scope should be as well as how it should be funded.

In the next 12 months to 15 months, the steering committee wants to have a strategy well-vetted for both, said

Leaders estimate the first-year annual cost of a city-only program is \$16 million to \$18 million, while a countywide program would cost \$32 million to \$36 million.

“Everything is on the table in terms of revenue,” Landsman said. “I’m not a big fan of raising taxes for anything other than something that’s absolutely urgent. I bet that 2016 will be a very important year, a very transformational year.

“The economies that are growing are investing in both infrastructure and people. I’m convinced that this is a community ready to invest in people.”

Under the proposal, every family in the eligible geographic area will get some sort of tuition credit for a high-quality preschool program based on an income-based sliding scale. The program also would provide technical support to preschools to help them become highly rated.

The initiative emerged from the Leadership Cincinnati program through the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber of Commerce. [A study by the University of Cincinnati](#) estimated universal preschool would lead to \$48 million to \$69 million in reduced public expenditures in the city on services, such as police, social service programs K-12 education, as well as increased tax revenue. Cincinnati would be the first city to offer universal pre-K to all three- and four-year-olds.

Absent from the steering committee are leaders from Cincinnati’s politically important corporate giants, such as Procter & Gamble and Western & Southern.

“I think they’re very much part of the conversation,” Landsman said.

Universal pre-K is “an issue of fairness, an issue of justice,” Landsman added. The program would bring it to “corners that haven’t experienced fairness and justice in a long time.”

Members of the steering committee are:

- Pamela Brailsford, Cintas Corporation
- [Stephanie Byrd](#), United Way of Greater Cincinnati’s Success By 6
- Pastor Gregory Chandler, Whole Again International
- Pastor Jerry Culbreth, Tried Stone New Beginning Baptist Church
- Bishop Michael Dantley, Christ Emmanuel Christian Fellowship
- Jennifer Dauer, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center
- Ozie Davis III, Avondale Comprehensive Development Corporation
- Ryan DuPree, Christ Emmanuel Christian Fellowship
- Margaret Fox, Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati
- Patti Gleason, Cincinnati Early Learning Center, Inc.
- Pastor Aaron Greenlea, Baptist Minister Conference of Greater Cincinnati
- Elisa Hoffman, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Troy Jackson, The AMOS Project
- Donna Jones Baker, The Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio
- Rabbi Lewis Kamrass, Isaac M. Wise Temple

- [Greg Landsman](#), StrivePartnership
- Leslie Maloney, Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation
- Vice Mayor David Mann, Cincinnati City Council
- Ross Meyer, United Way of Greater Cincinnati
- Pastor Chuck Mingo, Crossroads Community Church
- Dr. O'dell Owens, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College
- Julia Poston, Ernst & Young, LLP
- Jim Rigg, Archdiocese of Cincinnati
- Gwen Robinson, Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency
- Mary Ronan, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Dianne Rosenberg, The Greater Cincinnati Foundation
- Julie Sellers, Cincinnati Federation of Teachers
- Steve Shifman, Michelman
- Liza Smitherman, Jostin Construction
- Pastor Ennis Tait, Church of the Living God
- Shiloh Turner, The Greater Cincinnati Foundation
- Sandy Walker, YMCA of Greater Cincinnati
- Sallie Westheimer, 4C for Children

<http://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2015/05/21/tax-increase-to-fund-universal-preschool-expected.html>