

School mill levy override detailed as necessary, reasonable, accountable

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Necessary. Reasonable. Accountable.

These are the three points emphasized by committees explaining the Holyoke School District Re-1J mill levy election question on the Nov. 2 ballot.

Touting the importance of making sure accurate information is in the hands of the voters, PASS (People Advocating Successful Schools) committee members have put together a brochure which highlights specific details.

Additionally, presentations are being made to groups, giving voters the opportunity to seek answers about Question 3B on the Holyoke School District ballot.

The mill levy override request of 7.5 mills will generate about \$340,000-\$413,614 annually, depending on the assessed valuation of the district. The additional revenue will go toward technology, capital projects and operations.

A sunset provision assures this override will not continue without taxpayer support. Question 3B on the ballot seeks an additional 7.5 mills for five years, then 4.5 mills continuing for the next five years. The entire override will expire in 10 years.

Cost of 7.5 mills

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(Approximate, based on assessed valuation each year)

\$4.98/month on \$100,000 home

\$18.13/month on \$100,000 business

47¢/yr./acre of irrigated farm ground

21¢/yr./acre of dryland farm ground

7¢/yr./acre of grass/pasture

Necessary

Reduced state funding, aging facilities, changing technology and prior cuts have led to the necessity of requesting additional revenue.

During the last school year, when the state was faced with huge cutbacks, the school district had a \$103,000 rescission. The state took back that money that would have come to the district through the school funding formula.

For the current school year, the district lost about \$250,000 of revenue for the year when the per pupil operating cost was cut by about \$438 per student.

And next year is anticipated to be worse with the sunset of Amendment 23 and current economic reports coming from the legislature.

In recent years, the mill levy to the school district has been lowered, and for several years the general fund levy has been as low as it can go. Each year the mill levy was lowered, a larger portion of the revenue started coming from the state.

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Ten years ago, local taxes made up 42 percent of the revenue for the district, while the state contributed the other 58 percent. As more revenue came from the state, the school district became more dependent on the condition of the state's budget.

As a result, now that the state is making unprecedented cuts to K-12 education, it becomes a local decision whether to increase the local contribution.

Holyoke Elementary School is 56 years old and Holyoke High School is 35. To learn more about the current state of the buildings, the district hired a company to create a facility master plan.

Through that, it was learned the district has good buildings that are structurally sound. With some minor renovation and upkeep, they will serve the community well for many years to come.

With good information as to what needs to be addressed in the next 10 years, priority projects have been designated.

They include roof replacement, significant upgrades to the elementary boiler system, restroom upgrades to ADA code, science lab remodeling and electrical system upgrades.

Safety issues that need to be addressed include security, lighting and air quality.

Technology has consistently been at the top of the list of needs and priorities in the district in order to prepare students to enter college or the work force.

Technology is no longer about learning to use a computer. Today's students use computers to learn content. They require Internet speed that is sufficient to research and communicate instantly.

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Preparing students to enter college or the work force successfully requires adequate technology. For Holyoke, a 2009 state facility review process cited technology at Holyoke Elementary as “one of the most lacking schools in the state.”

Students today need access to computers and need to navigate networks, save files on servers and share documents. This will be expected of them when they leave HHS.

Multiple cuts have been made in the district, which has now led the school board to seek taxpayer assistance through the mill levy override.

For 2010-11, there are only two, instead of three, teachers for grade 7-12 math and for grade 7-12 social studies. An elementary teacher was eliminated, reducing sixth grade to two sections, and the third grade class went from three to two sections.

Additionally, a library aide and one bus route were eliminated, only minor capital projects were included in the budget and moneys from reserves are being used as revenue for 2010-11.

Prior to this year, the district eliminated an elementary counselor position and a woodshop program, lost a certified librarian/media specialist, endured a five percent pay cut to licensed staff in 2006, reduced equipment and supply budgets and eliminated a JR/SR high assistant principal position.

Reasonable

Question 3B is cited as a reasonable request, with cost estimates as follows:

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An additional 7.5 mills on the local mill levy will cost taxpayers approximately \$4.98 per month on a \$100,000 home, \$18.13 per month on a \$100,000 business, 47 cents per acre of irrigated farm ground per year, 21 cents per acre of dryland farm ground per year and 7 cents per acre of grass/pasture per year.

Leverage is cited as an advantage of increased revenue in the district. Additional technology funds will help secure matches for future grants. Capital project funds can be matched by the BEST program, a capital construction grant program operated through the Colorado Dept. of Education.

The first year, the mill levy override will be used as follows, based on a projected \$340,000 revenue from 7.5 mills:

—\$210,000 to capital projects will allow the district to address the goals of the master facilities plan.

—\$50,000 toward technology will double the current annual budget.

—\$80,000 toward operations will meet supply and personnel goals.

Accountable

Accountability is the final piece and a huge one the school board wrestled with before coming to its final decision for the mill levy question format.

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The sunset provision assures the mill levy override can't be continued without the vote of local taxpayers. It's designed to not continue forever.

As stated in Question 3B on the ballot, the mill levy override will include 7.5 mills for five years. Three mills will then be eliminated, with 4.5 mills continuing for an additional five years. The entire override will expire in 10 years.

Citizens and staff meet monthly as the district budget and facilities committee to review budgets and advise the school board. This group will annually report on the use of the mill levy override money.

In addition, by going to the district's website at www.holyoke.schoolfusion.us, one will be able to see where every dollar of the override is spent.

Public info meeting set

A public informational meeting has been scheduled for Thursday, Oct. 14 at 7 p.m. at the Peerless. School district patrons are encouraged to attend that meeting and to seek answers to their questions prior to that if they would like.

Members of the presentation committee include Dennis Herman, Tom Bennett, Supt. Bret Miles, board president Dan Kafka and Brenda Brandt.