

Mill levy override input sought; study committee needed

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Community members who are interested in serving on a committee to generate awareness of the school financial situation and potentially promote a mill levy override election are asked to contact a school board member soon.

Close to 25 gathered in the HHS library Thursday, April 30 to gain a better understanding of the reasons a mill levy override is being considered.

School board president Kendon Olofson said because there is a school board candidate election scheduled in November of 2009 anyway, adding a mill levy override question would not require a whole lot of additional election costs.

However, if the mill levy override waits a year when there is no school election planned in 2010, the cost for the ballot question would be in the \$8,000-\$10,000 range.

By July 24 (100 days before the Nov. 3 election), if a mill levy override question is to appear on the ballot, the board must notify the Phillips County Clerk of its intent.

With mill levy override funds always coming in a year after they're actually voted on, Olofson pointed out the timing is crucial.

Olofson noted Thursday that it's currently a consensus of the board to go forward with the mill levy override election, which is actually a local property tax increase.

However, Friday he emphasized that in board discussion of the subject there was no verbal opposition to going for the mill levy override.

Olofson clarified no board vote has been taken, and while it's a consensus to go forward, it's not necessarily unanimous.

Kim Killin emphasized the need to articulate what will be done with the additional moneys if the decision is made to seek a mill levy override. She added articulation needs to come early, and the community needs to know what the plan is.

With technology upgrades being one area the district is lacking, that could be a consideration for seeking additional tax funds. Board member Linda Jelden pointed out technology is a term people understand, but just saying "general fund" increase isn't going to be clear enough for the voting public.

Killin suggested before going for additional technology dollars the board needs to make sure current decisions are working. She cited the sixth grade move to the JR/SR High by way of example.

Dist. goals involve money

Olofson kicked off Thursday's meeting by highlighting the board's five goals:

- improve student achievement.
- maintain \$1.2 million in general reserve fund.
- work toward a balanced budget.
- build an adequate capital reserve fund.
- study a mill levy override.

He pointed out four of the five goals involve money, and the lack of money affects the first one—to improve student achievement.

Holyoke JR/SR High Principal Susan Ortner, Elementary Principal Jennifer Kral and Director of Budget and Finance Sharon Thompson did a nice job of presenting information to those attending last week's meeting.

A brief video clip titled "Shift Happens" or "Did You Know?" opened their presentation. "We're looking at education that's changed dramatically," noted Ortner. Kral added, "We as educators are expected to prepare kids for jobs that don't even exist today."

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The principals asked the community to work with them collaboratively to provide the best education for Holyoke students and to move the district forward.

Thompson gave a financial update, noting this fiscal year (July 1, 2008-June 30, 2009) started with \$1.7 million in reserves. While a deficit of \$609,000 was budgeted for 2008-09, she said as of this week, it looks like it will be closer to a \$200,000 deficit.

Thompson noted the district is talking about a cash balance, which now projects to be about \$1.5 million in reserves at the end of the year. She pointed out the audit goes on accrued balance, which could show \$1.1-1.2 million in reserves.

Further grant moneys are being applied for to offset the Heating, Venting and Air Conditioning (HVAC) costs the district endured recently.

Declining enrollment has led to financial concerns in the district over the past several years. While the actual student count has leveled off, the averaging of recent years' counts still leads to a drop in the funded student count. A drop of about 19 is projected for 2009-2010.

Thompson noted the district has been conservative and has cut back in many areas. Some of the larger items cut or reduced in the past four years have included professional development, district travel for FCCLA and FBLA, elementary counselor position, library/media specialist, half of an assistant HS principal position, industrial arts teacher and for next year, an elementary art teaching position.

Reasons cited for needing a mill levy override include educational/instructional needs, technology needs, capital project needs and transportation needs.

John Vasa expressed concern for the number of exchange students the taxpayers are educating. However, it was pointed out if exchange students were eliminated, staff could still not be reduced, and the costs would remain the same.

Questions about the new alternative school also arose. This first year, \$30,000 was spent from the general fund, and next year \$5,000 is budgeted. Moneys taper off in the four-year grant funding.

Looking at an April 15 building suitability study, school officials cited the district's low scores in technology.

Olofson noted one elementary classroom teacher uses her own laptop, camera and clickers. Kral emphasized these teachers shouldn't have to spend their own money to engage students.

From the property tax increase perspective, Kathy Schneller said with the high water tax assessment, their taxes increased 247 percent. It was a major increase this year, especially for agriculture, which she noted pays 37 percent of the taxes.

Olofson reiterated the need for people to serve on a committee to assess the needs and costs and to start conversations among the citizens. "If there's not enough support in the community, we'll have to pass (on the mill levy override election)," he added.

At some point, the board will have to step aside and community leaders take over to promote any mill levy increase.

Board members, in addition to Olofson, are Kris Camblin, Linda Jelden, Dan Kafka, Jon King, Laura Krogmeier and Jeff Tharp.