

Ballot details set for mill levy override

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

One ballot question, seeking a 7.5 mill increase in local school funding, will appear on the Nov. 2 ballot for Holyoke School District Re-1J.

Within that question, however, there will be two different sunset provisions. The 7.5 mill levy override will be imposed for five years, reducing to 4.5 mills for the remainder of the 10-year term.

Depending on the school district's assessed valuation each year, 7.5 mills equates to approximately \$400,000 in local property taxes.

In order to maintain the full 7.5 mill increase for the full 10 years, another question would need to go to the school district voters in five years.

Wording for the ballot question was finalized at the Aug. 17 meeting of the Board of Education.

Supt. Bret Miles said he had received good feedback from focus groups pertaining to the mill levy election. He made two proposals for ballot questions, based on a combination of board discussion and focus group input.

While Miles favored the option which the board adopted, he did offer a second choice. It called for a 7.5 mill increase for a full 10 years.

Included in the purposes for the 7.5 mill increase are:

—renovating and repairing existing facilities to extend their useful life, improve energy efficiency, update the science lab and make life safety upgrades.

—upgrading the technology infrastructure of the district.

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—purchasing and installing instructional and informational technology.

—restoring and updating instructional supplies and materials.

—attracting and retaining qualified teachers and providing additional staff for essential education programs.

Miles said feedback from the business focus group indicated personnel needs change faster than capital project needs. For instance, if enrollment grows or declines or if the school finance act changes, additional moneys from local property taxes might not be needed for the full 10 years.

Business community members indicated to Miles the mill levy override is more palatable if they know there's some relief five years from now if they don't like what's happening.

On the downside of that, Miles pointed out if nothing is corrected during that time, and an attempt to vote in a continued mill levy after five years fails, the district is likely to lose something it really needs.

Miles noted one of the elements which could make this year's mill levy override successful is to have the partnership with business. As a result, he recommended the two-tiered sunset for ballot wording.

"We're seeking accountability over stability at this time," added Miles, noting voters should keep apprised of the financial status, as the district could be asking again if it feels funds are needed.

Board member Kris Camblin said he likes the recommendation from the business community, as it holds the district accountable.

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Jeff Tharp agreed three mills would be a lot to lose after five years. But he has confidence in the administration to deal with that at the time to assess the financial needs.

Dan Kafka pointed out it's never a good time to ask for additional funds, and for that reason considerable effort was made to get input from people who are directly affected. He noted appreciation for the members of the business community saying the mill levy override is palatable.

The business property tax will bear the brunt in terms of percentage of tax increase, but Kafka noted landowners will certainly pay a considerable amount, as well.

Jon King voiced support for the ballot option proposed by Miles, noting it's good to see how tax moneys are spent.

Sunset provisions, or time limits on the proposed property tax increase, hold the school district accountable, said Linda Jelden. She said she still contends that five years is not a very long time for funding to make a difference. However, her support for a full 10-year sunset is moderate compared to the need for accountability to the public.

"Regardless of which option, people need to know the story and know it well," said Jelden. "They need to understand it," she added.

Kim Killin noted the ballot question doesn't allocate certain dollars to each purpose highlighted for the additional mill levy. In five years, that can be reassessed. Supt. Miles emphasized the need to be very honest with the public five years from now, to explain what the additional mills are going toward.

Killin pointed out when the State of Colorado passed TABOR (Taxpayers Bill of Rights), they didn't completely understand it. But what they were seeking was accountability. That's what this mill levy override election is providing.

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Killin added many people are affected by inadequate funding of schools—not just the students currently in the schools.

Tharp agreed, noting people are drawn more to a community where education seems to get consistent support.

Killin cited people's concern for lack of control. She said this approach to the mill levy override gives confidence that the district is going to do it, but not overdo it. "That says a lot," she added.

Laura Krogmeier said the thought of two questions on the ballot initially appealed to her—simply for the accountability to the public. As a result, she likes the option of the two-tiered sunset.

Krogmeier noted it's critical to educate the community to understand what the district means by technology funds. She emphasized those who are further out from connectivity with the school do not have a clear picture of this need.

Kafka noted this question has not been without a lot of research and time spent. He said he's confident the board has given due diligence to input from the community.

"And now it's time to ask the community what kind of school they want," added Killin, noting the mill levy override is asking that question.