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April 5, 2007

As he has tirelessly given more than 100 presentations about the financial state of the West Aurora School District over the past couple months, Superintendent Jim Rydland has consistently heard one thing: Residents want the district to tighten its own belt before they'll support another operating-rate tax increase.

Rydland and the School Board have listened and acted. Fourteen administrative positions have been eliminated, saving more than \$1 million. The district has refinanced bonds to save \$3.2 million and reduced the debt tax rate. An energy-reduction program has trimmed \$50,000, and a performance-based audit has provided another layer of accountability beyond the mandated review.

Rydland started a community dialogue about the state of the district and has made himself available even by cell phone. The public's input has been taken seriously.

The proposed 50-cent increase in the district's operating rate is long overdue. The last voter-approved tax hike came in 1988. Since then, the number of students served by the West Aurora School District has grown to 12,300 -- an increase of 5,000 students. And while the taxable property value in the district has increased over the past two decades as well, the growth has not entirely paid for the new students largely because of the state's tax cap.

In the first year, the higher operating rate would cost taxpayers \$167 for every \$100,000 of their homes' property value. Even after the tax hike, West Aurora homeowners would still pay less in school property taxes than residents pay now in all the neighboring school districts except East Aurora.

So far, West Aurora has been able to survive. But projected deficits in the coming years would deplete the operating-fund balance by 2009, meaning damaging cuts will be necessary if the referendum doesn't pass. The School Board already has a contingency plan. Earlier this week, the board approved the elimination of 128 positions, including 44 teachers. Some will be asked to return if the referendum passes.

A successful tax increase would also allow the district to improve security, maintenance and technology in its buildings, and update its equipment, books and buses.

The situation on the West Side might not be as dire as the one on the East Side, but that doesn't mean this referendum isn't needed. Since West Aurora last passed an operating-rate increase, several districts in the area have passed multiple referendums. That disparity not only puts students at a competitive disadvantage; it affects where people choose to live and fuels the perception that Aurora doesn't invest in education.

Let's prove them wrong. Vote "yes" for the West Aurora School District referendum on April 17.

W. Aurora referendum, ...

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Suburban taxpayers wait for it like the thunder that follows lightning in a summertime storm.

New school buildings approved? Great. Just wait — here comes the operations tax rate increase.

Not so in West Aurora school District 129. The growing district — which serves the west side of Aurora, North Aurora, and part of Montgomery and eastern Sugar Grove Township — has not had an operating tax rate increase since 1988.

During that time, it has built four new schools (one a larger replacement) and a transportation center and tacked on six additions or major upgrades. And, it is serving 5,000 more students.

The district asked twice, in 1995 and 2001, for tax increases, but was turned down. This time, we recommend a “yes” vote.

This is an expensive one, to be sure. In the first year, it would cost about \$500 more for a home valued at \$300,000, with the costs going up as the home’s value increases.

But the district, which has a lower tax rate than just about every other one in the area, has made several moves to cut costs.

Superintendent Jim Rydland, who started in this job in 2005, conducted an audit right away and then refinanced bonds to save \$3.2 million. He also has slashed some administrative positions, for savings of \$1 million.

The additional tax money would go to the operating fund, which would pay for maintenance needs and security improvements in schools and on buses. Also, the district would set up replacement schedules for such key items as computers, roofs and HVAC systems; implement a teaching and learning plan; and would move the land/cash contributions from developers out of the operating fund.

If the tax increase request doesn’t pass, the district has discussed cutting dozens of staff — teachers, administrators, aides and others — to save \$4.2 million. Another \$2 million in cuts would have to be found the next school year.

We recommend a “yes” vote. It’s not going to be easy for taxpayers, but given the number of new homes and school construction in 19 years, the bill is certainly due.