

West sees communication as key to ballot victory
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AURORA -- Officials in the West Aurora School District appear confident they've not only uncovered all hidden issues within their buildings and bank accounts but, more importantly, relayed that information to concerned taxpayers who will have a decision to make at the polls on April 17.

West Aurora is asking voters to approve a referendum seeking a 50-cent tax hike per \$100 of equalized assessed valuation. That means owners of a home with a fair market value of \$100,000 should expect to pay an additional \$167 in property taxes per year.

Beginning with a districtwide survey sent out last spring, West officials have spent the past year informing residents of the district's status -- financially, fiscally and about the physical conditions of current facilities.

Superintendent Jim Rydland spearheaded more than 100 forums across the district, where he explained the health of the district, and unveiled "Vision 129."

"I'm really pleased," Rydland said. "It was our intentional plan to communicate with our community, to open a dialogue and listen. But it's equally important to say, 'Here are the issues, here are the solutions.'"

"Forums are powerful tools in terms of communication, and the most important thing for us is to listen."

Resentful of wayward promises in the past, residents responding to last year's survey clearly stated they'd settle for nothing less than the truth.

"I've been told over and over: 'Jim, stay that course. Keep us informed of your intentions and be respectful of how you use those tax dollars in terms of day-to-day operations,'" Rydland said.

Though some people attending the forums have stated their taxes already are too high, no group has been formed and no public outcry has been heard from those opposed to the referendum.

Cutting costs, staff

If voters approve, it would be the first time since 1988 that West has passed an operations-rate referendum. Back then, the district had 5,000 fewer students, 326 fewer certified staff and three fewer schools than today. Referendums in 1995 and 2001 were rejected by West Side taxpayers.

In an attempt to cut expenses over the last two years, Rydland has trimmed 12 administrative positions, including two custodial supervisors, and two "teachers on special assignment" at district headquarters. Those cuts will save the district \$1.1 million in annual salary and benefits.

Last fall in another cost-saving measure, the district refinanced bonds to take advantage of lower interest rates and save more than \$2.5 million.

And last week, the School Board approved sending reduction-in-force notices to 128 staff and faculty members, including 44 teachers.

Looking to future

A successful referendum would prevent the district from going \$3 million in debt in 2008. With a failed referendum, that number would grow exponentially in the coming years, and additional cuts -- which have not been discussed -- would be left to the School Board.

If successful, the referendum would be enough to fix the financial foundation for the long term and enable the district to start a refresh cycle for things like buses, computers, security cameras and band instruments, Rydland said.

"(If the referendum passes), we need to make sure we don't sit back and say, 'OK, now that we have an operating rate, we can stop communicating with our community,'" Rydland said. "That's not true ... it needs to continue.

"This is not just about an operating rate. This is about a school district reaffirming our public that we want their feedback."

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