

District 196 moving forward with plans for November levy referendum

The District 196 School Board is moving forward with plans to call for an operating levy referendum increase this fall that would allow the district to avoid up to \$18 million in additional budget cuts and fund improvements to classroom staffing, increased mental health support for students and after-school activity bus transportation.

The board reviewed an administrative recommendation at its June 24 meeting and is expected to approve a resolution calling for an operating levy referendum at its next regular meeting July 22.

The recommendation is to revoke the existing operating levy of \$940 per pupil, which was approved by district voters in 2013, and replace it with a new 10-year levy for \$1,567 per pupil, an increase of \$627 per pupil. The single ballot question would raise an additional \$19 million per year, plus annual inflationary increases. The net tax impact of the proposed question would be \$25 per month, or \$300 per year, on the average-value home in the district, which is \$286,500.

If successful, the additional revenue would allow the district to:

- Avoid additional budget cuts of up to \$18 million over the next two years;
- Restore staffing cuts that are part of \$7 million in budget adjustments implemented for the 2019-20 school year;
- Restore classroom staffing eliminated during budget cuts from 2009 to 2012;
- Provide increased mental health support staffing at all schools in the district, and
- Restore after-school activity bus transportation at all district middle schools and high schools.

Last fall, the district identified a \$25 million budget shortfall over the next three years, and earlier this year the board approved the first \$7 million in budget adjustments for the coming school year. The cuts included elimination of more than 30 teaching positions, reduced funding for instructional supplies and increased fees for students to participate in cocurricular activities. Superintendent Mary M. Kreger said the budget shortfall is the direct result of years of underfunding from the state for both basic and special education. Last year, she said, the underfunding of special education in District 196 was \$29 million.

“Even though we are in good economic times, the Legislature approved only inflationary increases for the next two years,” Kreger said. “While we are grateful for the increases we did receive, it’s apparent we cannot rely on the state to make up for previous underfunding. We will need to ask our voters to increase local property taxes, if they

want to avoid additional budget cuts of up to \$18 million and restore some previous cuts that have negatively impacted our district.”

Participants in budget adjustment focus group meetings held in December expressed support for seeking an operating levy increase that would allow the district to not only avoid additional cuts, but also restore some previous cuts and make program improvements.

Support for bringing a levy referendum was also confirmed in a community survey conducted for the district this spring.

Sixty-four percent of respondents said they would support a levy referendum and three-fourths of residents surveyed said they would be more likely to vote for a levy if it included funding to provide lower class sizes, increased mental health support for students and restoration of after-school activity bus transportation at all middle schools and high schools.

“None of us at this table take a decision like this lightly,” said Vice Chairperson Joel Albright. “We recognize that taxpayer dollars are entrusted to us to be spent wisely and we put a lot of thought and care into that. We’ve got the best school district and it’s because of the support of the community. We’ve heard what the community wants and that’s where the money will go if we can pass this levy.”

If the levy question does not pass, the additional budget cuts would include significant staffing reductions in all areas, increased class sizes across the district, less support for students, the elimination of certain programs, and possibly reduced transportation service to the state minimum of two miles or more from school.