

West goes for referendum

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By TIM WAGNER STAFF WRITER

AURORA -- Now it's officially up to the taxpayers.

After months of discussion, board members on Monday unanimously approved placing a tax referendum, to be used for operating expenses, on the April 17 ballot.

The tax hike of 50 cents per \$100 of fair market value means the owner of a \$200,000 home would pay an additional \$333 in property taxes per year.

The average value of a West Side home is \$173,981, said Kevin Wegner, the district's assistant superintendent of finance.

The referendum is geared toward the day-to-day operational fund for a district heading toward a debt of about \$3 million in 2008.

There is no bond issue at stake this year, meaning no new schools will be built and the district would maintain its current structure.

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.

"They're fundamental," Superintendent Jim Rydland said. "They're not frills."

As the district continues to grow -- there are 12,010 students in district schools this year - - a successful referendum would also allow West the potential of leasing portable classrooms to be used for overflow at Hill, Nicholson and Fearn elementary schools, said district architect Pat Callahan.

Originally, West officials considered placing a referendum on the November 2006 ballot, but a district-wide survey indicated that residents wanted more information regarding the district's intentions. With that, Rydland spearheaded a three-month project of leading forums with various groups throughout the community. To date, he's held more than 60 meetings.

At times, those sessions were spirited, as residents sounded off with frustrations. But Rydland vowed to communicate with community members, and often mentioned that not all dialogues are free of conflict, yet healthy and important nonetheless.

"Community members have been open, honest and candid, and we're already using some of their feedback in the decisions we make," Rydland said. "Community feedback transfers into our decision-making and, because of it, we will be better in the future."

"There's not much more important on our public's mind than education, and how it enhances our place to live," said board member Laurie Hoffman. "Without trying to sound too dramatic, our future is at stake here."

West last passed an operational referendum in 1988, when there were 4,800 fewer students, 326 fewer certified staff and three fewer schools than there are today.

Referendums in April of 1995 and 2001 were rejected by West Side taxpayers.

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