

Survey says Dist.129 should wait for referendum

By Leslie Hague

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Posted Tuesday, July 11, 2006

The West Aurora Unit District 129 should wait until spring to pursue a tax rate increase, Superintendent Jim Rydland said on Monday.

His recommendation followed hearing the results of a community survey that the school board commissioned.

It said 46 percent of respondents would support a 45- to 50-cent tax rate increase to fund operating expenses in the district. Fifteen percent were undecided, said Pat Quinn of survey firm School Perceptions of Singer, Wis.

Some respondents noted their problems with district communication, use of tax dollars and planning.

"We have some work to do to build trust in the community," Rydland said. "I think November would be premature to ask."

The survey was conducted online and got more than 1,200 responses. The margin of error was less than 3 percent, Quinn said.

He noted that the high number of "undecided" responses regarding tax increases was unusual.

"There's a large number of people out there who are open to listening to what you have to say," he said.

A running theme through the responses was that residents wanted more open communication from the district, Quinn said.

School officials stressed they wanted to take the results of the survey and incorporate them into the district's plans, and to be present at community events to get more feedback.

"The communication shouldn't stop with this document," said board member Allyson Herget. "This is not the end, but the beginning."

The school district will be \$1.9 million in debt after this school year, which could balloon to

\$2.9 million the year after.

A 45 or 50 percent tax rate increase per \$100 of equalized assessed value would cost the owner of a \$200,000 home about \$300 to \$334 more a year, according to the district.

That would maintain programs and allow the district to operate in the black, said district spokesman Mike Chapin.

The district has been making cutbacks, including eliminating six administrative positions this year, he said.

Another survey question asked if residents would be willing to support an additional 5-cent tax rate increase to implement the district's new "teaching and learning plan," which would include teacher training and materials to focus on individual student learning.

Thirty-nine percent of respondents said they would support that. Seventeen percent were undecided.