

West sets the price to fix its finances

December 5, 2006

By TIM WAGNER STAFF WRITER

AURORA -- Though plans of the West Aurora School District pursuing a referendum are likely, but not yet official, a district administrator for the first time placed a number on what the district might be asking of residents come April.

Kevin Wegner, assistant superintendent of finance, told the School Board on Monday that one half of one percent "would be enough to fix the financial foundation for the long term."

The referendum, centered around the operations rate of a district projected to go about \$3 million in debt in 2008, means that taxpayers who own a \$200,000 home would face an additional \$333 in property taxes annually.

Wegner cautioned that the number is an estimate, but it could be slightly higher or more likely lower, given the current state of a declining real estate market.

Salaries and benefits comprise about 76 percent of the district's operating expenses. The plan would be to hold the rate constant for the next four years, Wegner said. The district has about \$3.3 million in land-cash but, according to regulations, that money cannot be used for operations. Should the School Board decide to move forward with a referendum and, if it passes, the \$3.3 million would be allocated elsewhere and used to purchase land for the building of future schools, or to improve current facilities.

"As expenses continue to outnumber revenue," Wegner said, "we have to take larger and larger loans to cover the cash flow.

"There are things we believe in and want to do, but because of our financial situation, we're unable to."

Many of those immediate concerns revolve around life and safety issues, like installing security cameras in all schools and buses. Wegner said the extra funds brought in by the passage of a referendum would enable the district to develop a "refresh cycle" for things like buses, computers, copy machines, band instruments, painting, and maintenance vehicles, among many others.

"We're restricting funds to make sure this district is meeting obligations in the future," said Superintendent Jim Rydland.

In other news, district architect Pat Callahan provided the board with a list of quick-start, short-term (within five years) and long-term (up to 10 years) projects.

Quick-start projects range from installing security cameras to leasing portable classrooms at Nicholson, Fearn and Hill elementary schools -- three buildings in dire need of additions or complete rebuilding. In the event Lincoln Elementary and Nicholson are consolidated, and Hill is rebuilt on its current site -- all options that have been discussed - - Callahan said the portable classrooms would be placed on school grounds in areas that would not interrupt construction.

"This board is very serious about issues relative to increasing taxes and increasing the burden on the community," Board President Rick Slocum said.

"It's a long, hard road," said Board Member Sonni Herget. "But we're all here for the same purpose -- to provide the best for our kids."

Rydland expects to make a formal recommendation to the Board, regarding the referendum and possible restructuring of the district, at the Jan. 8 meeting.

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