

West Aurora residents dole out advice at school forums

December 7, 2006

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AURORA -- Don't cut music and sports.

Avoid overcrowded classrooms.

Don't waste money.

And get parents more involved.

Those are among the many responses heard from residents on West Aurora School Superintendent Jim Rydland's whirlwind tour of the School District.

Rydland has completed a two-month series of forums where he introduced "Vision 129" to an assortment of groups, engaged in discussions with residents, and collected more feedback, in his attempt to build trust with taxpayers.

Though the School Board is not expected to make a referendum decision until Jan. 8, a proposal was provided to the board this week to raise the tax rate by 50 cents per \$100 of equalized assessed evaluation. That means the owner of a \$200,000 home would pay an additional \$333 in property taxes per year.

Should a referendum pass, the extra money would be used for operational expenses and prevent the district from dipping into debt, which is expected to reach nearly \$3 million in 2008.

Rydland has engaged in 50 presentations or discussions, and he'll continue to meet with various groups into the new year.

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

At the information sessions, Rydland posed four questions under the categories of Teaching and Learning, Safe and Secure Buildings, Finances, and Communication:

- What do we need to continue?

- What do we need to change?
- What do we need to create?
- What do we need to cancel?

### Teaching and Learning

"Overall, there was a great deal of support for maintaining current programs and even increasing program offerings in certain areas," a report from School Perceptions LLC says. The company analyzed six of the information forums.

"The support voiced was far larger than any expressed desire to cut or reduce current programming."

The district received positive support for the current art and music programs, the high quality of teachers, small class sizes, lengthening the school day and making the curriculum more challenging and standards-based.

There was a clearly stated opposition to cutting art, music and sports, the report said.

### Safe and Secure Buildings

Overall, residents concurred that the students are safe in their current environments, though the district is exploring the installation of security cameras in all buildings and buses, an idea the community has met with applause.

There was "a great deal of concern that West High School is overcrowded ... and is growing too big," the report said.

With the passage of a referendum, the district would likely move \$3.3 million in land-cash out of the operations fund, where it cannot be used, and use it to purchase land, including homes around West High, for future construction and building additions, said Kevin Wegner, the district's assistant superintendent of finance.

### Finances

"Overall, the number of comments in this area is startlingly low," the report said. "In addition, the feedback in the area of finances was unusually positive for today's fiscal climate. It is clear from the comments that the fiscally conservative approach of the district has been well-communicated and is appreciated."

Although there were a smattering of comments about "wasted money," it is clear that these are isolated incidences or related to the past rather than the present, the report said.

## Communication

The report indicated positive feedback regarding the current level and mode of communication, and the amount and types of information being shared with the public. There was a desire for increased non-English communication, and "because a portion of your community and parents do not speak English at home, this need becomes vital," the report said.

There were concerns about updating the district Web site in a timely manner and better communication on the part of the transportation department to parents,

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