

April 5, W. Aurora referendum, board picks

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Suburban taxpayers wait for it like the thunder that follows lightning in a summertime storm.

New school buildings approved? Great. Just wait — here comes the operations tax rate increase.

Not so in West Aurora school District 129. The growing district — which serves the west side of Aurora, North Aurora, and part of Montgomery and eastern Sugar Grove Township — has not had an operating tax rate increase since 1988.

During that time, it has built four new schools (one a larger replacement) and a transportation center and tacked on six additions or major upgrades. And, it is serving 5,000 more students.

The district asked twice, in 1995 and 2001, for tax increases, but was turned down. This time, we recommend a “yes” vote.

This is an expensive one, to be sure. In the first year, it would cost about \$500 more for a home valued at \$300,000, with the costs going up as the home’s value increases.

But the district, which has a lower tax rate than just about every other one in the area, has made several moves to cut costs.

Superintendent Jim Rydland, who started in this job in 2005, conducted an audit right away and then refinanced bonds to save \$3.2 million. He also has slashed some administrative positions, for savings of \$1 million.

The additional tax money would go to the operating fund, which would pay for maintenance needs and security improvements in schools and on buses. Also, the district would set up replacement schedules for such key items as computers, roofs and HVAC systems; implement a teaching and learning plan; and would move the land/cash contributions from developers out of the operating fund.

If the tax increase request doesn’t pass, the district has discussed cutting dozens of staff — teachers, administrators, aides and others — to save \$4.2 million. Another \$2 million in cuts would have to be found the next school year.

We recommend a “yes” vote. It’s not going to be easy for taxpayers, but given the number of new homes and school construction in 19 years, the bill is certainly due.

West Aurora school board

District 129 has one of the oldest schools in the area — Hill Elementary, built in 1888 — and is also planning for more growth.

Those elected to the district's school board expect to face issues that both aging and growing districts deal with, which are borne out in the tax increase referendum on the April 17 ballot.

The race for four 4-year seats on the board was once a field of 10, but two dropped out. The remaining field includes two incumbents and several impressive challengers.

We endorse incumbents Allan Rhea and Allyson “Sonni” Herget, and challengers Angela Smith and James Toynton.

Rhea, a retired teacher and four-year board member, is a watchdog on financial issues. Herget is an eight-year member who realizes the board has to restore some of the trust it lost with residents because of some previous district decisions. Smith, a mother of three, has a great grasp on the issues that face the district and how it can better serve residents. Toynton, a former teacher, administrator and business owner, has some good ideas for district improvement.

Also running are William Spaeth, Carl Franco, Ann Bachman-Thomas and Scott Farnum.