Edgar K-12 preps referendum info

By Kevin O'Brien

At the second meeting of the Edgar School District's Community Action Team (CAT) last Thursday, members geared up for a two-month get-out-the-vote campaign for a $1.4 million operational referendum that will appear on the Nov. 3 ballot.

The school board approved a resolution at its Aug. 19 meeting to to proceed with the non-recurring referendum, which is needed to help cover annual operational expenses after the district's current five-year referendum expires on June 30, 2027.

CAT members met Aug. 27 to review informational materials presented by superintendent Cari Guden to explain why the district is seeking permission to exceed its revenue limit by $1.4 million for each of the next five school years. Much of the group's discussion focused on how the referendum, if passed, would impact individual taxpayers going forward.

According to projections provided by the district, the owners of an average-priced home in Edgar, worth $229,000, would pay an extra $16 per month to the school district in the first year after the referendum passed. This would be the result of the district's mil rate increasing by



Cari Guden

83 cents per thousand dollars of property value ($83 per $100,000).

In years two through five of the referendum, however, the mil rate is projected to go down and eventually average out to a rate lower than what is currently charged to property owners.

It was noted at last week's meeting that the referendum would only affect the school district's portion of the property tax bill, which also includes contributions to Marathon County, Northcentral Technical College and the taxpayer's municipality. Although K-12 funding is always the largest part of any property tax bill, the other taxing jurisdictions are able to increase their own mil rates based on how much net new construction occurs within their boundaries.

School board member Rebecca Normington wondered how the mil rate is projected to actually go down in the final four years of the referendum if the district is asking for more money. Guden said that downward trend is largely the result of declining enrollment projected over the next five years, which will negatively impact the district's ability to raise funds.

"Enrollment drives everything," said Morgan Mueller, the district's former bookkeeper.

Conversely, if more state aid were to be provided by the legislature – an unlikely scenario based on the current biennium budget – the school board could choose to collect less taxes than it originally planned, an option referred to as "underlevying."

If the referendum does not pass, the district's mil rate would fall, but it would also be forced to consider reducing its staff, cutting back on programming such as middle school sports and deferring maintenance projects and curriculum updates.

Even with the additional $1.4 million provided by the referendum, Guden said the district is still projected to face budget deficits in upcoming years.

The informational materials provided by the district also explain why the district is not able to operate with the current level of funding provided by the state and local taxpayers. Per-pupil aid provided by the state has not kept pace with inflation since 2010, causing the district's revenue limit to fall behind by about $3,500 per student, or nearly $1.8 million overall, according to the district.

Guden said superintendents have been lobbying for more K-12 funding for years, most recently in the area of special education, which was given a modest boost as part of the most recent state budget. Still, she said the district consistently has to divert money from its general fund to pay for mandated services provided to high-needs students.

Another drain on the district's finances is the state's private school voucher program, which resulted in Edgar's public schools losing $378,429 in state funding this year so that local families could send their kids to places like St. John's Catholic School and Newman Catholic in Wausau, according to the district's informational materials.

All of this information will be presented to local residents over the next couple months through flyers, frequently asked questions and a recorded presentation by Guden going through a PowerPoint slides. One of the sections that drew praise from CAT members had to do with what the district can be proud of, such as its quality teaching staff, academic achievements and sports accomplishments.

"People lose sight of that when they get upset about their property taxes," Mueller said.

The Record Review

How to reach us
103 W. Spruce St.
PO. Box 677, Abbotsford, WI 54405
Phone 715-223-2342
FAX 715-223-3505
E-mail: rr@tpprinting.com
Web page: www.centralwinews.com

Our staff
Co-publishers Kris O'Leary and Kevin Flink
Reporters Casey Krautkramer and Kevin O'Brien
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