

School district launches PR campaign on tax vote

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Walled Lake school district officials are cranking up the publicity machine in efforts to reduce confusion among residents about the Nov. 18 millage renewal election.

To be decided on that Saturday is a 10-year millage renewal that would continue the existing operating millage rate of 18 mills for businesses and 4.13 mills for residential property. At stake is about 23 percent of the district's operating budget for 1996-97, estimated at \$1,659 per pupil.

Despite post-proposal confusion and backlash from three bond issues that were set up and shot down between October 1993 and February 1995, Superintendent James Geisler said the issue at hand is still pretty clear-cut.

"If I wrote the ballot (language) it would read, 'Do you want schools to be the way they are in Walled Lake, yes or no?'"

Meanwhile, what Geisler and other officials want to make sure is that people don't confuse the upcoming renewal with the three bond issues. Those proposals were to add space and technology, while millages are strictly to generate operating revenue.

"The thought of it not passing, for whatever reason, and the kind of devastation that would do... is really staggering," Geisler said during a recent interview. "So I think our position is to be as

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proactive as possible, and get as much information out as possible."

If the millage is defeated, the amount of total lost revenue would probably result in cuts to programs and services. According to a fact sheet being distributed by the district, that money would fund the following:

- The annual approximate cost of operating nine of the district's 14 elementary schools.
- All transportation, athletics, custodial, maintenance, technology, staff development and supply accounts.
- Nearly half of the 1996-97 teaching staff — or 364 teachers.
- An increase in elementary and secondary class-size averages to about 45 and 65 pupils, respectively.
- Elimination of art, music, physical education, media specialists and counseling services.

According to Geisler, the recent bond issue history in Walled Lake underscores the importance of informing the public. A video about the millage renewal is being produced.

Geisler and Lois Lange, district director of personnel and community relations, said a major task will be effectively communicating what the millage renewal entails and how much their tax bill will be — particularly in the post-proposal era.

In 1993, before the state changed its school funding mechanism, residents were levied nearly 37 mills. The current millage levy is 10.13 mills. Of that amount, the state would continue to levy six mills while residents would pay the remaining 4.13 "harmless" mills.

"After the last (bond) election, we did research, surveys, focus groups," Lange said. "What we keep hearing is, there's just a whole lot of education that has to take place."

Geisler said there hasn't so far been any significant opposition to the millage renewal bid. He did say the district would have to look into trying the renewal again.

He added that outside of the bond issue attempts, the general public has backed the district.

"In our board elections, with the incumbents returned to office by a comfortable margin, I think — while people may have had problems with the bond issues — in spite of that, the general operation of the school district has been supported" by the population," Geisler said.

The superintendent added, "It's not an increase, it's a renewal. It's for 10 years and it's following a pattern that's never been objected to that I'm aware of."

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Millage renewal gets state, local leaders' solid support

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Indications are that the Walled Lake Consolidated School District is getting more across-the-board support for its scheduled Nov. 18 millage renewal election than for any of the three failed bond issue attempts between October 1993 and February 1995.

At Thursday's school board meeting, Superintendent James Geisler mentioned that 39th District state Rep. Barbara Dobb, R-Commerce Twp., backed the renewal of the existing 10-year operating millage. On Saturday, Nov. 18, voters will decide whether to renew 18 mills on business and industrial property and up to 4.3 mills on residential property.

"In the past, we have not had Barbara Dobb's support on some of the bond issues," said Samantha Ruetenik, school trustee

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Samantha Ruetenik
school trustee

board trustee.

Geisler also told the board, and audience at the Educational Service Center, that endorsements had come in from Wixom Mayor Michael McDonald, although he had criticized the district during the most recent bond issue campaign.

Walled Lake Mayor William Roberts also offered his endorsement, said Geisler.

Supporting the 10-year renewal in an open letter to taxpayers were Dobb, 39th District state Rep. Willis Bullard, R-Milford, and 44th District state Rep. David Galloway, R-White Lake.

"It must be emphasized that this renewal will not raise your current millage rate or your taxes," the letter stated. "It simply renews the established rate, which you currently pay to operate the school district. We support the millage renewal proposal... It is imperative that you, the local voters, renew your locally collected operational millage to continue to ensure that schools are funded at an established under Proposal A."

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