

Millage advocacy group formed

BY SUE BUCK
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The cost of education is rising and the local taxpayer's bill for it would increase if voters approve two tax questions this fall.

If both Oakland Schools enhanced tax requests for special education and vocational education pass Sept. 26, the total tax bill for education on a home valued at \$200,000 (total taxable value \$100,000) would increase from \$2,071 to \$2,211.

The special education tax would result in an increase of \$117.04 per year; the vocational education tax will represent an increase of \$22 annually.

Overall, a yes vote would raise more than \$50 million for special education and more than \$10 million for vocational education.

Officials can't advocate

School officials have the sensitive job of getting information out without advocating, which is prohibited by law.

"We have to be real careful. The Q & A piece is considered pretty neutral," said Farmington School Superintendent Bob Maxfield. "Parent groups may be out there pushing more directly."

According to the Michigan Campaign Finance Act and "Do's and Don'ts" literature from Oakland Schools:

■ The school board and superintendent can actively advocate for a ballot question. All other employees of a district may not. School district employees may advocate on their own time and at their own expense.

■ School districts and its employees may produce and disseminate factual information about a ballot question. They can distribute this information via publications that are regularly produced.

Teachers' lounges, bulletin boards, or other areas within a district can't be used to advocate for or against a question.

The last day to register for the election is Aug. 27. To register, contact any Secretary of State's office.

Absentee ballots will be available Sept. 5. School district officials must be on hand to provide absentee ballots before the election to accommodate application requests for absentee ballots. The polls, which will be the same locations as for all school elections, will open at 7 a.m. and close at 8 p.m.

Getting the word out

Oakland Schools suggests that districts hold their "back to school" open houses before the election in order to disseminate information. That's not difficult for this school district because those are traditionally held during the early weeks of the school year, Maxfield said. Some schools plan to also run a promotional video during that time.

The employee associations said they would like to be part of it as well, Maxfield said. "We asked some of our staff if they would be willing on their own time."

Zan Alley, a director in the office that houses Farmington Schools' various units, volunteered use of their building on Hills Tech Drive as an advocacy site, he said. Alley said someone from the community will run the campaign.

Anyone may attend a discussion on the two tax questions at 7 p.m. Sept. 10 at the Costick Center, 11 Mile east of Middlebelt. The PTA Council and the Special Education Forum host.

The election will be decided by

a simple majority of the total votes cast cumulatively by each of the 28 school districts. Absentee ballots can be obtained through the school district.

Members of the advocacy committee are:

■ Kim Heath and Angie Smith, tax campaign committee chairwomen.

■ Julie Devine, PTA council president.

■ Dick Wallace, who sat on the Blue Ribbon Financial Strategies Committee, a citizens' group that reviews the budget.

■ Carolyn Das, member, special education parent forum.

■ Doug Klegon, parent.

■ Dick Carroll, resident.

■ Abe Aon, resident.

Heath, who is both the legislative chairwoman for the Farmington PTA Council and president of the Longacre Elementary PTA, said one of her first questions was, "Why do we need this? A lot of explaining had to be done for me."

That soon turned into her opinion: "I believe it is a good thing."

The vocational education tax has been increased since 1967. "Businesses couldn't operate on 1967 dollars," she said. "Keeping up with a changing curriculum, as the world changes, we need to change."

Heath said the district is doing a better job at identifying children who need special education services. The \$3.5 million increase would help to offset a \$3.2 million budget reduction this year, which officials said is directly related to funding special education.

If the tax increase is approved, money could become available this year, Heath said.

For absentee ballot information, call 248-489-3349.

Witness with immunity says Djoumessi admitted raping teen from Cameroon

BY KEVIN BROWN
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Joseph Djoumessi confessed to a family member that he had raped the teenage girl living in his house, according to testimony offered at trial Monday.

"He admitted that he had sex with (the teen)," said Patrick Che, cousin of Evelyn Djoumessi, Joseph Djoumessi's wife.

Che, 37, a Detroit teacher, testified in Oakland Circuit Court, as the trial of Farmington Hills residents Djoumessi and his wife, Evelyn, continued this week.

Che, who the teen referred to in earlier testimony as Uncle Patrick, said the teen told him in 1998 when she was 16 that Joseph Djoumessi had raped her.

The teen, now 18, has alleged that Djoumessi raped her five times and that the couple would beat her. The Djoumessis are charged with conspiring to kidnap, kidnapping and child abuse. Joseph Djoumessi also faces two counts of first-degree criminal

sexual conduct and third-degree criminal sexual conduct.

Trying to help

The Djoumessis maintain they were only trying to help a girl, who has now turned on them and lied to police. The couple, the teen and cousin Che, are from Cameroon.

Che said that when he'd earlier confronted Djoumessi with the girl's allegation, "He said he was going to go home and he was going to make it right."

After later admitting to having sex with the girl, "He was kind of sad," Che said as the jury and Judge Alice Gilbert looked on. Che testified that Djoumessi told him he was drunk when he had sex with the girl.

Assistant prosecutor Cheryl Matthews asked Che why he didn't call police. Che said he was concerned for his family. But he said that when the teen told him a few months later that she had been raped again, "I said her not to show up and call the police if possible," he said.

Che said he asked the couple

twice to let the teen stay with him, to diffuse tension between her and the Djoumessis. "Both said no," he recalled.

Immunity for perjury

Court testimony established that Che was to be given immunity from prosecution for his testimony in the case. He admitted to lying in 4th District Court in Farmington Hills last year during a preliminary exam on the charges against the Djoumessis.

"He was still my family. I didn't want to be part of it," Che said. "I ultimately decided the best thing is to tell the truth. I called the detective the next day."

Djoumessi defense attorney Cornelius Pitts rose frequently to object during Che's testimony, claiming it was based only on what the teen had told him.

Testimony was scheduled to continue this week, with the teen's mother from Cameroon expected to testify on behalf of the Djoumessis. The accused couple could also be called to stand this week.

Fairlane Club asks: Is your firm physically fit?

The Fairlane Club is planning a Corporate Fitness Challenge on Wednesday and Thursday, October 24 and October 25, 2001 and is now ready to accept registration of Corporate Teams.

Competing Teams will consist of four people (both men and women of all ages are invited to participate). Large firms may wish to have several four-person teams. Any firm is invited to

participate.

For details of specific events or to register, contact: Mark Wisneski, Athletic Director at (313) 336-4400, Ext. 269 or email him at: mark.wisneski@ourclub.com

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funds to appropriately reimburse the school districts on what they are spending for special ed."

Costs have grown about four percent annually over the past 10 years. Michigan public schools are required to fund special education, so many school districts are dipping into general funds to make up shortfalls.

Critics charge that efforts should be stepped up to get proper funding from the state and federal government. Supporters say the Durant lawsuits are focused on that battle. They point out it took 17 years for the first Durant suit to be resolved in the schools' favor, and special education needs won't wait that long.

"Even if the state/federal government made good on its contribution, it would leave some costs unpaid such that general funds would have to maintain some responsibility," according to Oakland Schools information.

Farmington Public Schools would receive more than \$3 million from the special education increase. This reimbursement would offset the recent \$3.2 million budget reductions in the district's budget.

"A concern which comes up is: if the county will go ahead and increase its reimbursement for special ed, doesn't that take the state off the hook with the Durant suit?" Maxfield said.

The Durant vs. State of Michigan class action lawsuit, filed in 1980 by various districts in Michigan, claimed underfunding of programs and a violation of Section 29 of the State constitution known as the Headlee Amendment. This amendment requires the State to fund mandated programs at the same proportion of the State budget as when the amendment was adopted in 1978.

The mandated programs involved were special education,

special transportation, the school lunch program, and driver education.

In July 1997, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that districts were harmed by the underfunding and ordered payment for three years of the 17 years claimed. On April 16, 1998, Farmington received \$9,494,233.

Still, a growing number of special education students, coupled with funding that hasn't kept pace with these demands, creates yearly budget crunches for local districts.

Cheryl Cannon, assistant superintendent of business finance and operations, said other counties are also considering the same type of millages.

While the funding requested Sept. 25 isn't the total answer, school officials say they hope it will be a start in the right direction.

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four Oakland Technical Centers operated by Oakland Schools. The increase is termed "modest" by school officials.

It will also encourage a partnership between two or more districts, to offer career-focused programs at local high schools. Oakland County funds areas ranks 29th of 29 intermediate school districts in Michigan who operate Career-Focused Education programs. More dollars are needed to provide quality education, officials said.

"Five years ago, there was a major task force put together involving business, school and parent representatives to look at the future of vocational education," said Farmington School Superintendent Bob Maxfield.

The millage would provide facility updates, including renovation and upgrading of computer networks.

"Once that need is addressed, money will be available to support regional programming," Maxfield said.

Funding could provide an incentive for Farmington Public Schools to open its Publications and Processes program, housed in a wing at Farmington High School, to students from other districts. In the 4,000-square-foot lab, students become adept at a variety of software applications, producing a promotional item, like T-shirts.

"Birmingham has a fabulous robotics program," Maxfield said. "You have pockets of these things throughout the county."

Additional dollars could also lead to expansion of business education links, which resulted

from the study five years ago.

Chrysler has a manufacturing academy open to students in the northeast part of the county. General Motors has an academy in Pontiac, attended by students in three or four districts, Maxfield said.

The program's goal is to help students attain "family wage" jobs, a term used by the Michigan Department of Career Development. This is a wage level that allows a person to support a family.

"People making less than \$20,000 who are trying to support a family will have a hard time," Maxfield said. "The point of all that is that there is a mismatch. If (vocational education) becomes an alternative wave of knowledge, Voc Ed has always been out there."

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11 Pines from page A1

site plan for the project.

The development would happen on 110 acres near the current golf course at 11 Mile and Halsted roads. Much of the project is intended for the Eleven Pines property, just southwest of the San Marino course.

Improvements to support the project include capping a landfill that takes up most of the southern end of the Eleven Pines property. Capping would involve placing six inches of clay, then six inches of topsoil over areas of the landfill where contamination is suspected. The plan is approved by the state Department of Environmental Quality.

Land sale transaction

In a report to the council, City Manager Steve Brock said, "This project has become essentially a land sale transaction, whereby the developer will purchase land from the city and construct residential housing."

The plan estimates the sale price of that land at \$3.25 million. This money would help defray the estimated \$10 million to build the golf course, cap the landfill, and complete other improvements.

Several residents took their turns praising or questioning the plan reviewed by council members. Mary Johnston, an environmental activist, said, "I'm not a golfer and I don't want to pay \$1 million per hole. The city manager ought to recuse himself as a golfer."

Councilman Jerry Ellis responded that the council was following the citizens' direction, in pursuing the golf course expansion. "We've received petitions signed by hundreds of people," he said, backing a golf course expansion.

"So much of what you see is a reaction to what people are telling us," said Mayor Nancy Bates.

Brock said the cost to build nine holes on the Eleven Pines property, and to reconfigure four holes on the current San Marino course, is projected at \$220,000 per hole. Other projected costs include: renovating the remaining five holes at San Marino at \$200,000 per hole which puts the total projected cost of the golf course at \$4.3 million; a landfill cap, \$1.6 million; a tunnel to connect the parcels, \$500,000; a new clubhouse, \$1.7 million; and a driving range, \$100,000.

To pay landfill capping costs, the city's brownfield redevelopment authority can capture some tax proceeds sparked by residential development. Preliminary plans also call for \$1.5 million in park-recreation millage to go toward the project.

"Grants are a possibility; there will be a lot of borrowing, quite frankly," Brock said. Some of the project cost will ultimately be paid from golf course proceeds. "The whole idea here is not to use general tax money, it should be a self-sustaining operation," the city manager said.

Residents speak out

"I think we need nine more holes," Dennis Melampy told council members. "When I call San Marino it's generally very busy."

Melampy said he's tired of going to Livonia to play that city's municipally owned course, adding Farmington Hills currently owns just the one nine-hole course. "We really need a full-fledged golf course."

Steve Roberts told council members that bike trails and

hiking trails, also listed on surveys as favored by residents, were not being addressed. Brock responded that a bike trail is intended to circle the perimeter of the project.

Loretta Zims said she was concerned that more residential units would boost school class sizes. Councilman Chris McRae said the units, expected to sell at around \$400,000 each, are geared more toward retirees and less toward families with young children.

James Orr of the Old Homestead subdivision said city officials once talked of including 500 residential units, instead of the currently proposed 72 units. "Where did the rest of the land go?" he asked.

Brock said earlier housing projections were overambitious, and said space devoted to the golf course has been expanded. The current plan also eliminates office development. He said planned building around the border of the former landfill isn't feasible, due to extensive capping costs to support such building.

The council did reject the first development agreement presented Monday, saying certain specifics were not sufficiently detailed. They directed Brock to meet with the developer and to return quickly with a letter of intent governing a site plan agreement acceptable to both parties.

For the project to be ultimately approved, the site plan must be approved by the city planning commission and city council.

Brock said the city has already entered into a contract with a golf course architect.