

Officials call anti-millage ads unfair, inaccurate

By Casey Hans staff writer

Farmington school officials reacted publicly to a recent advertising campaign opposing the district's proposed millage increase, saying the ads are inaccurate, deceiving and unfair.

The full-page ads in the Farmington Observer, run by Alexander Hamilton Life Insurance Co. in Farmington Hills and signed by the company's board chairman Richard Headlee, said the district has a \$14.9 million surplus in its coffers.

The ad titled "Taxpayers' Alert" — first appeared Jan. 3. But superintendent Michael Flanagan said the figures used were taken from a June 30, 1990, financial statement which did not take into ac-

count \$6.7 million in open purchase orders not yet paid, \$796,000 in physical inventory and \$625,000 in vested termination pay which cannot be touched, and \$5.8 million in state money recaptured last August.

In effect, he said, the district today has little more than \$13 million in its cash reserves "at best." "We have made it very clear that the \$14 million does not exist," he said Tuesday. "We've said it politely, we've said it privately to the individuals involved and we've said it publicly."

HE LIKENED the situation to an individual looking at a June 30 personal checking account statement today.

"Is it even relevant to what's in there today?" he said. "That is not

School Millage

an appropriate measure to look at."

Flanagan had explained the figures at other recent school board meetings, where Alexander Hamilton executives had challenged them. He also took exception to the noted student enrollment increase of five percent, compared with the district's budget increase which the ad lists at 78 percent. He said the ad did not take into account that:

• Although secondary student populations have been declining since 1986, they have not declined enough to close any buildings. And elemen-

tary student populations have shot up, forcing the district to open two additional schools in the past two years, causing additional costs in staffing and operations.

• The district was forced to spend operating money for capital projects since losing a bond issue in 1988 — something Headlee and his organization worked to defeat. Flanagan said the district has spent about \$7 million a year from its operating budget, where other districts had voter-approved bond issues for such work.

• As it has in the private business community, insurance costs have "exploded" in the past few years. Flanagan said, jumping from \$2 million to \$10 million — 10 percent of the district's budget. "I don't think we should be embarrassed to

provide health insurance that allows our employees to get heart transplants," Flanagan added, perhaps taking a shot at Headlee who had such a transplant a few years ago.

"The ad was unfair, in the least," he said.

Board president Susan Rennels said the company's advertising campaign was like pitting "cannons against peashooters" when compared to the efforts of a parent group supporting the millage measure.

"We have a large corporate entity . . . which is part of a larger entity out of Chicago . . . that apparently has an unlimited budget to spend," she said.

Although trustees did not comment on the language used in the ad, which challenged school officials as

"arrogant," board member Jack Cotton said he was disturbed that anyone would question the board's integrity in how they run a millage campaign.

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2 sides gird for school millage campaign

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and why they're doing it. "Basically, we're a group of parents who is working by word of mouth. We're parents trying to tell parents . . . we've got quality education here and let's not lose it."

The Friends group has organized informational meetings at each school building to promote their message.

School officials say they are doing their part to get information out to the public, while being careful not to promote a "yes" vote. An informational meeting is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 28, at Harrison High School, where Superintendent Michael Flanagan, school board president Susan Rennels and others will be on hand to answer questions. A school district newsletter, slated to be mailed within the next week, will also offer voters basic information.

But an anti-tax group called Citizens for Quality Schools, has formed, with organizer Richard DeVries contending that the district should better spend the money it has.

And tax-cut guru Headlee, chairman of the board for Alexander Hamilton Life Insurance of Farmington Hills, began running full-page advertisements last week opposing the increase. The ads say Headlee and his people are "troubled by the excessive spending growth" in the

district which they say has risen 78 percent in five years. Headlee also takes pot shots at school officials, saying they have refused to debate the issues. "Their arrogance is quite improper and most unbecoming," he adds.

Flanagan said much of the reason for the district's increased operating budget is due to the approximately \$8 million budgeted each year to take care of building renovations and capital projects, because voters turned down a bond issue to fund them in the fall of 1988. He said about another \$8 million per year is a budget slash: It involves Oakland County-funded special education programs.

BOARD PRESIDENT Rennels said she was not surprised Headlee ran the ad, a similar tactic he used to help defeat the \$27 million bond issue in 1988, but she said she was "surprised at the tone" of the ad and that he ran it so soon before the election.

She said board members have not been involved in promoting the election, leaving it to the organized parent group which she called "very active."

Meanwhile, employees throughout the Farmington school district confide they are concerned about the outcome of the upcoming election. Flanagan has vowed "serious, deep cuts" will be made to staffing and programs "affecting every building."

If the first proposal fails, "I don't think people understand that what it (the district) is," he said. "We're people intensive. You just can't cut \$6 million without tearing the guts out of the program."

For those who say this can be done without an increase, I hope they can be accountable.

If the second proposal fails, he said, any capital work would be curtailed. He also said he would not recommend the district go to the voters again if a majority turns defeats the ballot proposals in February.

"We're going to go on either way," he added. "But people have to vote knowing the consequences."

Tax hike question has 2 parts

The Farmington Public Schools will go to voters Tuesday, Feb. 5, to request a new tax for school operations. The ballot will have two parts: Proposition 1 will pass only if Proposition 1 is approved by voters.

• Proposition 1 — asks for 2.7-mill operating tax to make up for \$5.8 million in state money recaptured by legislative action last summer. School officials say the millage is required to maintain current programs; a loss would require staff and program cutbacks. The district currently levies 32.05 operating mills and .80 mill in debt retirement.

• Proposition 2 — asks for 1 additional mill in operating tax for additions, renovations and repairs of district buildings, as recommended in a facility study completed last

fall. One mill would give the district about \$2.5 million per year.

Both proposals are for 20 years. A resident with a \$100,000 house, with a State Equalized Value of \$50,000, would pay an additional \$135 per year in property taxes for Propositions 1 or \$185 per year if Propositions 1 and 2 are approved.

Residents who will be out of town on election day, are incarcerated awaiting trial or arraignment, are at least 60 years of age, or are physically unable to get to the polls can cast an absentee ballot. Ballots are available in person or by mail at the Lewis Schulman Administrative Center, 32500 Shilwassee. Ballots will be available Monday through Friday from Jan. 16 to Feb. 4 from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The office will also be open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 2, to accept absentee ballots.

The Farmington district encompasses all of the city of Farmington, most of the city of Farmington Hills and a portion of West Bloomfield Township.

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