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Fill 'er up: Local ballot taking shape

Planned measures include tax levies to fund schools, libraries

By Jennifer Anderson

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Portland Public Schools officials say a proposed tax levy would help maintain class sizes and preserve art and music. Above, Victoria Lewis teaches Spanish at Marshall High. Now that the general election is just over three months away, the competition is heating up as several groups kick off their tax measure campaigns to support schools, libraries, natural areas and soil and water districts.

"The ballot is crowded," said city Commissioner Sam Adams, who will help lead fundraising efforts for the levy that would raise at least \$33 million per year for Portland Public Schools. "Competition for campaign bucks is fierce, but I'm determined."

The school district probably will seek a five-year local option property tax levy to retain its current level of staff and programs. The levy would replace the \$21 million one-time contribution from the city and county this year and \$12 million the district used from its own reserves. The funds would be available starting in the 2007-08 school year.

Besides the school levy – which citizens discussed this week at two public meetings – Portland voters can expect to see at least seven other local property tax measures on the Nov. 4 ballot.

Noticeably absent from the ballot this year will be the Portland Parks & Recreation levy and the Portland Children's Investment Fund levy, both five-year measures approved by voters in 2002 and set to expire in June 2008.

Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the parks bureau and created the children's levy, decided to delay renewing that levy this year to clear the way for Portland Public Schools. He said he didn't want to jeopardize any chance of the school district's levy being approved.

"I think we all view each others' efforts as complementary," he said. "I think we also know that it's a tough environment out there to get tax levies approved. I think both of our measures compete for the same voter. Even though I feel if (the children's levy) did go out in November, we could win, I don't want to do it at the expense of the (school) district."

2008 measures planned

The parks levy will not be up for renewal this year because the timing simply was not right, said Matt Grumm, a Saltzman aide. The parks bureau just completed an officewide reorganization, and several of the major projects funded by the 2002 levy – such as skate parks and the East Portland community pool – are still in the works.

"It would be difficult to go to voters, standing next to the hole in the ground," Grumm said. "It will be different in 2008 when it'll be finished. ... We have to show voters what they got out of the levy."

Saltzman plans to ask voters in 2008 to renew both the children's levy and parks levy. The parks bureau will lose about \$8 million for services after the parks levy expires June 30, 2008, and before the new money would become available in July 2009.

The children's fund, however, will be able to support its youth programs during that gap through \$5 million to \$6 million in unanticipated tax revenues during the current levy period.

Voters can expect to see several other measures on the November 2006 ballot, including funds for Mt. Hood Community College, the Lusted Water District in Troutdale, the West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District, Metro's natural area acquisition and Multnomah County libraries. The Reynolds and David Douglas school districts also are finalizing their proposed bond measures.

The library levy would be set at a rate of 89 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, higher than the current amount of 75.5 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. Library spokeswoman Penny Hummel says the increase is due to rising staffing costs, compression and reduced general fund dollars from the county. It also will include operating funds for two new library branches, slated to open in New Columbia and Troutdale in the next levy period.

Hummel says the library depends on the levy for 55 percent of its \$49.7 million budget, and voters have been supporting it since the 1970s.

Levy already has supporters

Dozens of people gathered this week at two public meetings to provide input on the school levy, which the school board is expected to officially refer to voters Aug. 14.

Cathy Mincberg, the district's chief operating officer, told citizens that the levy will not be spent on administration costs, but on materials for teachers and students, maintaining class sizes, and keeping and adding back art, music and PE to all schools.

The district will ask for a citizen's audit and review of expenditures each year for accountability, similar to reviews of the Multnomah County income tax.

"Accountability will be a huge issue," says Rhys Scholes, a tax expert and parent volunteer who recently was named campaign manager for the school levy. "I think the district has made great strides in increasing its transparency. It's something a lot of us have noticed."

The school levy so far has the support of the Portland Schools Foundation and Portland Business Alliance, which both opposed the income tax proposed by Mayor Tom Potter this spring.

"A property tax makes sense because that's the way the local community supports their schools" under Oregon law, said Cynthia Guyer, the foundation's executive director.

PBA president Sandra McDonough said her board members want to focus their support during the election on supporting school funding measures in Portland and other districts. The levy is a "good thing to pursue as part of their overall finance plan," she said.

The last five-year property tax for Portland schools expired in 2004-05, during one group's effort to repeal the Multnomah County income tax. The school board did not feel it could campaign against the repeal and to renew the local option tax at the same time.

Mincberg and others feel that the district's recent move to close certain schools and turn others into K-8 models will be a selling point for voters, despite the controversy it stirred up.

“People in Portland really love their schools,” Scholes said. “We just have to get out and talk to an awful lot of voters about what’s going on in the schools and what the needs are and why a local option will meet their needs.”

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