

EDITORIAL

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What's at stake with the local school measures

For voters who haven't yet attempted to wade through this year's ballot, brace yourselves because it's lengthy with a lot of thought-provoking issues among the 14 statewide questions.

Periodically, we've tried to remind voters that the most impactful ballot decisions are at the bottom of the ballot. And even there, among the local questions, consider issues 4A and 4B the most critical.

Why? Because yes votes on these two measures keep Mesa County Valley School District 51's inertia going without interruption and without an increase in property taxes.

The 29 Road project, which is Issue 1A, is a bonding question. One of the arguments against it is that servicing the debt — should local officials decide to issue the bonds — would reduce the amount of money available for other capital projects in the valley. If it doesn't pass, our local elected officials could take another run at convincing voters of its value next year or thereafter.

But if 4A and 4B don't pass, the school district will quickly find itself in a financial pinch. Efforts to make teacher pay more competitive and plans for important capital improvements would have to be shelved. The school district would likely be forced to come back to voters for local support anyway, with the added onus of asking for a tax increase.

If 4B doesn't pass, the existing mill levy override, which provides \$6.5 million every year for an assortment of priorities, would end in 2027, forcing painful cuts. If 4A fails, the district has no way to address \$600 million in deferred maintenance, safety and security needs.

In a Q&A earlier this week, Dr. Brian Hill, D51's superintendent of schools, laid out the harsh reality of D51's funding challenges.

"Unfortunately, Colorado ranks 39th in the nation when it comes to K-12 funding, and D51 ranks 174th out of 178 school districts when it comes to per pupil funding," Hill said. "So, we are one of the lowest funded districts per student in a state that is one of the lowest when it comes to K-12 funding. Since we are funded per student, when you experience declining enrollment like we are that means less funding than we had in the past."

Mill levy overrides are a way for local school districts to ask their local community for funding above and beyond what the state provides. But D51 lags far behind comparable districts when it comes to mill levy overrides.

"On average, we receive about \$1,300 less per student than our comparable districts, and about \$1,100 of that difference comes from mill levy overrides," Hill said. "If we were funded at the average of our comparable districts, we would receive about \$26 million more in funding each year. The gap is large, and it is increasing."

The current mill levy override, which the community passed in 2017, has been funding five additional school days for kids, money for curriculum updates, money for capital improvements and money for some tech positions in schools.

“Those dollars will sunset soon if we don’t do something, so we are asking our community to let us keep what we already have, and that won’t increase the tax rate,” Hill said. “We’ve seen great results as a district since 2017, and we need this support to keep that momentum going.”

The district is paying off bond debt this year so it’s asking voters for permission to borrow another \$190 million without raising the tax rate. If 4A doesn’t pass, the next opportunity for a no-tax-rate-increase bond initiative would be 2041, Hill said.

Like a houseplant, the district needs to be well-watered to survive and thrive. We urge voters to keep the spigot running at current volume to avoid the predictable results that will arise otherwise.