

LA CONNER WEEKLY NEWS



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Schools to ask voters for a new levy

Sandy Stokes

The La Conner School Board met Monday and is expected to call for a special election in February to ask voters to approve more than \$1 million in taxes to take effect in 2017.

Although the board appeared to reach a consensus to ask voters to approve a maintenance and operations levy of \$1,195,000 and a technology levy of \$295,000, the board adjourned and continued its meeting to Thursday evening to vote. The main question left on the table on Monday was whether to seek one-year levies for 2017 or two-year levies that would expire at the end of 2018.

The board wants to wait for the outcome of a meeting with the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community Taxing Authority committee scheduled for Thursday afternoon.

Superintendent Tim Bruce said he will ask the tribe for \$400,000 to help support the schools next year and for an additional \$50,000 for technology.

If that conversation goes well, board members said they may feel confident enough to ask voters for a two-year levy.

Making a decision on Thursday night is down to the wire for the school district. The language for the levy is due into the Skagit County Auditor's office on Friday to appear on a February ballot.

"Once it goes past Dec. 11, what we put on there goes on the ballot," Bruce said.

Board President Rick Thompson noted that the local taxing situation in the wake of a federal appellate court's so-called Great Wolf Lodge decision is still new. Regardless of the meeting with the tribe, it might be a good idea to seek a one-year levy now "and go longer next time around."

Also, board members acknowledged that a one-year levy might be an easier sell with voters right now — many of whom are still reeling from tax increases caused when homes in Shelter Bay were taken off the local school tax rolls.

Last month, after about a year of negotiations, the tribe and schools reached an agreement on funding for this year — the tribe will contribute \$400,000 for 2015.

That contribution amounts to just over half the revenue lost when 941 non-tribal homes built on leased reservation land were removed from the county's tax rolls after the Court of Appeals for the Ninth District ruled that all structures built on tribal land are immune from state and county taxes, regardless of who owns them.

In all, some \$1.8 million in taxes generated by homes in Shelter Bay and in the Pull and Be Damned Road neighborhood could no longer be collected by the county, including the voter-approved bond and levies totaling more than \$779,000 for the schools.

Most of the tax burden was shifted to the remaining property owners, which number about 1,100 individuals, who own about 2,500 taxable parcels in the school district. About two-thirds of the schools' students live on land that the school district cannot tax. Further, a recent examination of voter rolls in the school district shows that more than 52 percent of the district's registered voters live on land that cannot be taxed by the district.

Swinomish established its own taxing authority and this year began assessing property taxes on the non-tribal homeowners who lease the land their structures were built on. The tribe's assessment was at the new, higher rate assessed to nearby privately owned land whose owners saw increases because of the tax shift. Based on current tax rates, the tribe stands to collect around \$2 million in property tax this year, with the majority of the money to be used to fund tribal government programs.

The tribe has contributed a portion of the taxes it collected this year to the schools, La Conner Library, Fire District 13 and Medic One ambulance service. Even so, all the entities except Medic One, which was already at its maximum taxing ability, raised its assessments on the remaining taxpayers.

In a press release from Swinomish released last week, the tribe announced that it will contribute a total of \$293,221 to the library, fire district and ambulance service in 2016.

Based on that, school officials are optimistic that the district will reach a funding agreement with the tribe for 2016.

In the Swinomish press release, Tribal Chairman Brian Cladoosby stated, "The Swinomish Tribe is of course under no legal obligation to provide support to these various local taxing districts, but we

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recognize the importance of the services the districts provide, whether they are supporting literacy or providing emergency medical and fire services.”
 The last time the school asked voters for a maintenance and operations and technology levies was in 2012, and the measures passed overwhelmingly with 71 percent approval.
 In 2013, five months before the Great Wolf Lodge court decision, more than 69 percent of the voters approved a \$20 million school construction bond.
 In both elections, the majority of the votes were cast in precincts on the Swinomish Reservation.

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