

LA CONNER WEEKLY NEWS



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Schools to seek two-year tax levy

Sandy Stokes

In a special election on Feb. 9, La Conner Schools will ask voters to approve more than \$1 million per year in taxes to be collected in 2017 and 2018.

Two new levies will replace a maintenance and operations and a technology levy that were approved by voters in 2012 and expire at the end of 2016.

The maintenance and operations levy helps pay for school programs like foreign language instruction, music, drama, athletic coach salaries and other benefits for children that state funding does not cover.

The tech levy, first approved by voters in 2008, provides laptop computers for each student and keeps classroom technology up to date.

Should the tax levies fail in February, the school district could try again in April to get voter approval, according to officials at the Skagit County elections office.

If the taxes are voted down, the schools would be faced with making cuts in 2017. "I don't even want to think about it failing," said School Board President Rick Thompson on Monday.

Though the school board resolutions to seek the replacement levies were approved at a special meeting last week, on Monday during the regular meeting, the board members present, Thompson, John Thulen and Kate Szurek, were planning ways to help voters understand what's at stake if the levies fail.

Between now and when the ballots are mailed in January, the board wants to sponsor two town-hall meetings, one at Maple Hall and another at Shelter Bay. Also, Szurek said she would be willing to host a smaller gathering at her home. The schools would like anyone else willing to host a levy information meeting at their home to contact the district office.

Historically, La Conner's school levies have passed in a landslide. But this time the school taxes are not so popular with everyone. Since the last election, the pool of individual taxpayers has shrunk by nearly half and more than 52 percent of the registered voters in the district live on land that cannot be taxed by the district.

The so-called Great Wolf Lodge decision by a federal appellate court mandated that buildings on land held in trust by the government for tribes are immune from state and county taxes, even when the buildings are owned by non-tribal members.

That caused 931 properties in Shelter Bay and in the Pull & Be Damned neighborhoods — where the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community leases the land to the homeowners whose houses are built on it — to be taken off the schools' tax rolls this year.

The tax burden was shifted to the remaining taxpayers, some of whom saw their property tax bills jump by close to 25 percent this year.

Even so, the non-tribal homeowners who lease the land under their houses do not live in a "tax free" zone. The tribe stepped in this year and began assessing the non-tribal members who own homes on leased land taxes at the same rate collected on privately owned property.

The tribe has agreed to contribute \$400,000 of about \$2 million it will collect this year to the schools. That contribution is just over half what the school district lost when the properties came off the rolls. The tribe is also making contributions totaling about \$230,000 to three of the eight other agencies that lost taxing authority on the Shelter Bay homes.

Last week school district officials met with the tribe's taxing committee to determine whether the district will receive another contribution in 2016. They came back with enough confidence to put 2-year levy requests before the voters: \$1,195,000 per year to be collected in 2017 and 2018 for maintenance and operations and another \$295,019 per year for technology.

Coupled with the on-going levy of nearly \$1.4 million per year to pay off a \$20 million school construction bond, the district estimates that taxpayers will pay \$6.17 per \$1,000 in assessed valuation to the schools in 2017 and 2018. That would be about \$1,234 per year in school taxes for a home valued at \$200,000.

This year and next, the levies are taking \$6.60 per \$1,000 in value — \$1,320 for the same home. The levies that expire next year account for about \$726 of that tax bill.

Even though the levies would be lower than this year, they could still be a tough sell for some voters. The numbers in this election are stacked against the people who will be actually paying the taxes:

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About two-thirds of the school district's students live on tribal land, which the district cannot tax. And an examination of the district's voter rolls just before last month's general election showed that more than 52 percent of the registered voters live on property not subject to school taxes. That means the majority of voters will be deciding on taxes to be paid by other people, not themselves. Under state law, school levies need only a simple majority to pass. In the last several school elections, the majority of the tax levy votes came from precincts on the Swinomish Reservation. Property that is not taxed by the district includes everything on reservation land held in trust by the U.S. government, everything owned by a housing authority, including the Maple Avenue apartments owned by the Swinomish Housing Authority and portions of Channel Cove owned by Home Trust of Skagit as well as publicly owned property including schools, port and town facilities.

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