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FEATURED TOP STORY

Three school districts putting levies before voters

By KERA WANIELISTA @Kera_SVH Jan 17, 2016



Brandy Shreve / Skagit Valley Herald

Adrian Hoare (from right), Evan Laptonak and Garrett Arendse practice Tuesday in the band room at Burlington-Edison High School. The band room will benefit if a levy is approved by voters who live within the school district.

ON THE WEB

For a video tour of Burlington-Edison High School's south end of campus, visit gorskagit.com

BURLINGTON — With its dimly lit, narrow hallways, the Burlington-Edison High School field house can be confusing.

Hallways wind from one entrance to the other, with antiquated lockers and bathrooms in between.

“It’s 50 or 60 years old and hasn’t been updated,” Burlington-Edison School District Superintendent Laurel Browning said. “Every turn is a line-of-sight issue.”

Doors leading from the street make it hard to manage who goes in and out of the building, and there is only one security camera inside. There are too many corners for many more.

“There’s just too many places where you can’t supervise,” Browning said.

The district is asking voters to decide on two levy proposals in the Feb. 9 special election. One is a new six-year, \$18.3 million capital projects and technology levy that would address issues such as the ones on the high school’s south end.

“We’re at the place where we need to take care of major modernization needs,” Browning said.

A large portion of the levy would be used at the high school, Browning said, modernizing the field house for accessibility, efficiency and safety.

“We have exceptional students,” Browning said. “We want them to feel safe, we want them to get where they need to go.”

Also included would be maintenance needs districtwide, including new roofs, boilers, air systems and carpet.

Every school in the district will also get a fresh coat of paint.

“Like anyone who owns a home or property, they’ve got to spend money to take care of them,” School Board President Roger Howard said. “We’ve got a lot of money invested in our facilities and we’ve got to take care of them.”



A broken sink in a girls' bathroom at Burlington-Edison High School is one of many outdated facility issues at the school.
Brandy Shreve / Skagit Valley Herald

The technology portion of the levy would be used to expand upon the two-year, \$800,000 technology levy voters approved in 2014.

“It’s a digital world,” Browning said. “And for our kids to be competitive, they need to have the skills. ... That starts here.”

In Jim Sargent’s eighth-grade classroom at Lucille Umbarger Elementary School, students are learning about national debt and the stock market.

On their Google Chromebooks, projects are completed in Google Drive, which allows students to review each other’s work before submitting it for a grade.

Having that ability, as well as the Internet at their fingertips, makes the work easier, said Logan Wright, 14.

“It gives a little more interest into the work,” he said. “It makes me want to learn more.”

In his 30 years of teaching, Sargent said the shift to technology has had a effect on learning.

“Individually, students can excel a lot faster,” Sargent said. “It’s more helping them ask questions than giving them answers.”

As the district moves to foster deeper learning, technology will be vital, said K.C. Knudson, executive director of teaching and learning.

“It’s hard to do that with static materials,” he said. “(Technology) becomes a critical part of a learning program.”



Yahaira Lopez, 11, (left) and Noemy Gonzalez, 11, use Chromebooks at Lucille Umbarger Elementary School on Tuesday to create a Powerpoint presentation about the Apollo space program.

Brandy Shreve / Skagit Valley Herald

The district is also proposing a four-year, \$37.8 million replacement educational programs and operations (EPO) levy to pay for things such as textbooks, counseling and health services, and extracurricular activities. The levy would account for 23 percent of the district operating budget.

“These are a have to have,” Browning said. “Not a nice to have.”

If both levies pass, taxpayers would pay \$5.58 per \$1,000 in assessed property valuation in 2017. That number would drop each year through the lengths of the levies.

A 2001 voter-approved construction bond used to build Lucille Umbarger is set to expire this year, but voters will still pay on a voter-approved debt bond.

Concrete

The Concrete School District is asking voters to decide on one issue: a three-year, \$5.5 million replacement EPO levy.

The levy comprises about 26 percent of the district's budget, Superintendent Barb Hawkings said, meaning that if it doesn't pass cuts will need to be made.

The district uses levy dollars to fund extracurricular activities such as band, special education and support services, a school nurse and a groundskeeper.

"If I had to cut that out, it would not be pretty," Hawkings said.

With its last levy, the district purchased several Chromebooks, which Hawkings said contributed to student learning.

If the levy passes, the district would add Chromebooks and increase training for teachers and staff.

"We have a computer lab, but only one class can be in the lab," Hawkings said. "And it's not the same as just being in your classrooms and having all your resources."

Because the district does not have a separate technology levy or a bond out, if approved, the EPO levy will mean taxpayers will pay only on that levy — a total of \$3.16 per \$1,000 in assessed property value in 2017. That number will drop to \$2.98 in 2018 and increase to \$3.02 in 2019.

La Conner

The La Conner School District has always felt confident voters in the district would support its levies, Superintendent Tim Bruce said.

But in the wake of the Great Wolf Lodge decision, which removed 931 properties on Swinomish Indian Tribal Community land from the county tax rolls and left the remaining La Conner property owners to make up the loss, the school district is less confident in its levy proposals.

"We've never had a challenge like this before," School Board President Rick Thompson said. "It's not because they don't want to support schools, it's because of the tax burden."

The district is asking voters to decide on two two-year replacement levies: one a \$2.39 million EPO levy, and the other a \$590,000 technology levy.

If passed, the levies would amount to a tax of \$3.20 per \$1,000 of assessed property value, an amount lower than what residents were paying before the Great Wolf decision, district director of business and operations Bonnie Haley said.

Taxpayers are also paying on a voter-approved construction bond.

Still, residents remain concerned about taking on more tax burdens.

"I think some of us feel helpless about this," Pam Church said at a recent community meeting with the school board. "The school district becomes a target."

The removal of the properties from the county tax rolls had a \$779,000 immediate impact on the school district, and therefore its taxpayers.

To help make up for that loss, the Swinomish tribe agreed to give the district \$400,000 for 2015, which the district used to offset the burden on those taxpayers who had their property taxes raised after the Great Wolf Lodge decision.

And before approving sending the levy proposals to voters, board members met with Swinomish tribal senators, and felt assured the tribe would contribute an additional \$400,000 during the first year of the new levies, which the district would again use to offset the impact on taxpayers.

The board also asked for an additional \$50,000 from the tribe to help offset costs specifically related to the technology levy and the tribe has agreed to that, Bruce said.

The district also reduced its collection amount by \$250,000 for each of the past two years and reduced the amount of money it is asking for in the replacement technology levy.

"We've done everything we can to reduce that tax burden," board member Brad Smith said. "With this levy, we're asking for a bare bones amount. We can't risk our kids' education by going so bare bones and counting on so many unknowns."

Some property owners said that while they have traditionally supported the schools, they are concerned about these levy proposals.

"We don't want to say 'no' to the school, we want the school to have good programs," said Kim Rubenstein. "However, we have to put food on the table and feed our family."

Former La Conner Town Councilman Dan O'Donnell suggested that if the district really wanted to make an impact on its budget, it could cut athletics.

"If you really want to be 'bare bones' and you really want to provide education to our children, eliminate sports," O'Donnell said.

That would not be ideal, Bruce said.

"At this point, the board hopes to maintain all programs," he said.

The EPO levy makes up about 13 percent of the district's budget. Without it, many extracurricular activities, such as arts and band, and staff would be in jeopardy.

Despite the challenge, Bruce said he believes the community in general supports the school and hopes it will continue to while the district, town officials, and state and federal legislators work to find a better solution to the lost tax money.

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