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Time to focus on school levies

Sandy Stokes

La Conner School District officials have scheduled meetings with voters to answer questions about two proposed school levies that will appear on ballots to be mailed soon. The first meeting is today, Wednesday at 7 p.m. at Maple Hall in La Conner. Another meeting is scheduled at the Shelter Bay Clubhouse at 7 p.m. next Wednesday, Jan. 13. The school district is hoping that voters will approve the levies totaling nearly \$1.5 million to replace voter-approved funding that expires at the end of this year. A proposed maintenance and operations levy would generate \$1,195,000 in 2017 and 2018 to pay for enrichment programs that basic state funding doesn't cover. The levy pays for drama, foreign language instruction, music, advanced math, athletics, extra curricular activities and other school offerings the state doesn't pay for. The second levy, a technology levy, would raise \$295,000 for each of the two years. That tax money is to pay for laptop computers for students to use at home and at school and to keep classroom technology up to date. Historically, La Conner's school levies have passed in a landslide with no fanfare and no controversy. This year is more challenging for the district because the tax base has shrunk, leaving a smaller pool of taxpayers hoisting a bigger share of the financial burden. Also most of the people who can vote in this election won't be on the hook for the taxes - but they can vote to raise their neighbor's taxes. When 931 parcels came off the county tax rolls last year, the tax burden was shifted to the remaining taxpayers, some of whom saw their property taxes go up by more than 20 percent in 2015. The tax shift was a result of a U.S. Ninth District Court of Appeals ruling that all structures built on tribal land - including homes in non-tribal developments like Shelter Bay built on leased Swinomish Reservation land - are immune from state and county taxes. Although the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community has assessed its own property tax on the non-tribal owners of homes on leased reservation land, most of the money it collects goes for tribal government services. District officials have said about two-thirds of the school's 600 students live on tribal land, including Shelter Bay and the Pull & Be Damned Road neighborhood. And a study of the voter rolls for the district just before the November general election showed that the majority of the voters live on tribal land and land that the district cannot tax. Ballots will be in the mail to the districts approximately 3,500 voters on Jan. 20 and will be counted on Feb. 9.

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