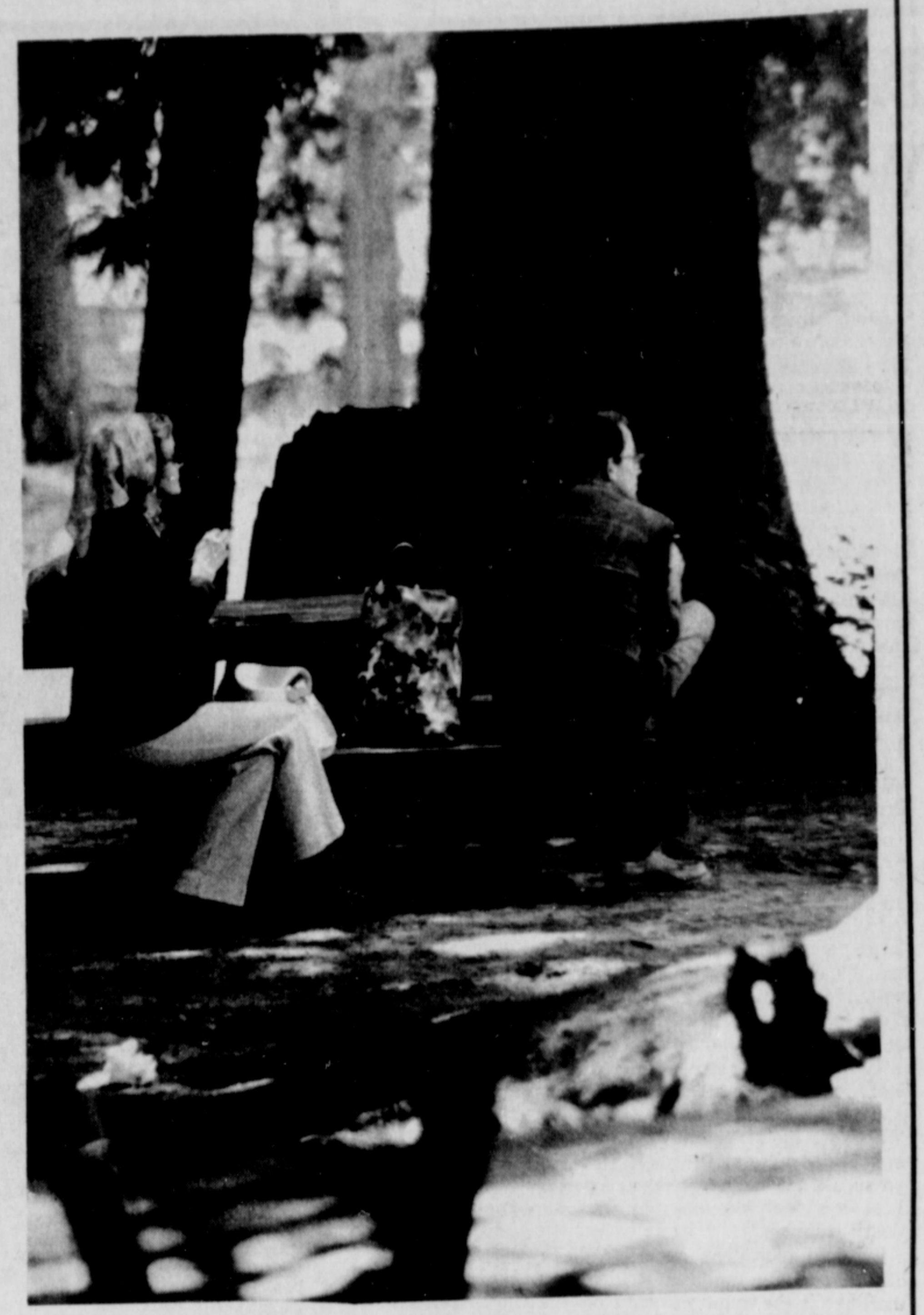
Meinig Park readied for the festival

Meinig Memorial Park is getting a fresh look for the Sandy Mountain Festival. City work crews and dozens of volunteers are working to get "the jewel of the city" ready for the thousands expected for the festivities set for July 8-9. The Spike Emerson Shelter is nearing completion and will be dedicated in a special ceremony during the Festival. The Mt. Hood Mudders spent most of a sunny Saturday afternoon last weekend installing benches along the trails in the park. (Photos are by Curt Koop.)



College wary as election approaches

Mt. Hood Community College "will have to cut about 500 classes out of the annual schedule and eliminate the equivalent of 100 full-time jobs if voters reject Tuesday's $2.5 million budget levy, President Steve Nicholson reported.

"If this levy fails, we must cut the budget by $2.5 million, a 20 percent reduction in the education we can offer," Nicholson said.

If the one-year levy fails, it "will result in a 14 percent reduction in classes, a 17 percent reduction in full-time positions, a 25 percent-to-100 percent reduction in supporting services and operations," Nicholson said.

Voters rejected a one-year special levy, which would replace the one which expires this month, by a vote of 4,337 to 4,237 in March. The measure was for $2,514,099.

The district's voters also turned down a proposed new tax base of $5,925,000 in May by a tally of 23,462 to 14,029.

by KEN DONEY

Mt. Hood Community College, caught between the forces of inflation and rebellious property taxpayers, is six days away from what could be the most important election in its 14-year history.

Steve Nicholson, MHCC president, is the man in the middle. He cannot control inflation. But, if voters insist, he can cut the budget — and that's exactly what will happen if Tuesday's levy is rejected.

"I think we've had all the invisible cuts over the past two years," he said. "Now the cuts are going to have to be much more visible — 500 to 600 classes, 100 jobs, fantastic reductions in supplies and services."

That will be the bottom line if voters reject the college's proposed one-year tax levy next Tuesday, Nicholson said.

The levy of $2.5 million is for operating funds only, would succeed a one-year special levy approved by voters last June, and would retain the existing property tax rate of $2.20 per $1,000 assessed valuation.

"Last year's budget levy was $1.6 million, this one is $879,000 more," Nicholson said. The increase represents the rate of inflation, he noted.

Voters in the MHCC district narrowly defeated a proposed one-year levy of $2,514,099 three months ago and solidly rejected a new tax base request of $5,925,000 at the polls May 23.

In fact, after a honeymoon in which all money measures were approved in the first decade of its life, Mt. Hood Community College now has lost eight of its last 10 over a four-year period.

The figures disturb Nicholson. But while trying to educate and convince voters that MHCC is caught in a financial squeeze, he must contend with a property taxpayers' revolt that is picking up momentum nationally.

"If you look at the statistics, the percentage of 'no' votes on our last election . . . was almost identical to the Jarvis-Gann percentage in California — about 60-40 or 63-37, somewhere in there," Nicholson said.

"I don't think it's a 'no' vote against the college, or against the Gresham School District or against Fire District 10, or against the City of Gresham. I think the taxpayers are saying there is only one place in which we can say, 'We just feel the tax burden is beyond reason.' "

Nicholson paused, gazing again at the unusually somber weather outside.

"Let's say a guy is on retirement and he can't afford any more taxes," the MHCC president continued. "That's understandable . . . Really, the tragedy of our society is the group of people who are not like you and me, are not in the mainstream of their years in terms of earning capacity, but people who really have been left behind at the station where they retired.

"And the inflation train keeps right on going."

Given an 8 percent inflation rate for the three-year period from 1976 to 1979, the college needs $2.45 million more than it did in 1976-77 to provide the same services and the same student enrollment.

"In order to buy the same things you bought last year, it takes 8 to 10 percent more money," Nicholson said. And, over a three-year period, suddenly you . . . look at what's happening and discover you're really in trouble.

"Even if you're working much more efficiently in some areas, you're still dollars behind."

Traditionally, students have paid 20 percent, the state 50 percent and local taxpayers 30 percent of MHCC's operating costs.

A reduction in property tax revenue might put pressure on the college to hike tuition rates, a course Nicholson wants to avoid.

Stephen Nicholson

Tuition, in his view, "is a user's tax" levied at a time when students "have the least amount of income, the least ability to pay, and their total future depends on it."

The biggest expense of a college education "is not tuition, room and board," Nicholson said. "It's the remission of income . . . If you figure the minimum wage and add that cost — what you could have made for four years — to the tuition, then you really begin to look at what it costs a person to get an education.

"And if they were employed at $4 or $5 an hour, then that's $10,000 in addition to room, board and so forth," he said.

"Our hope, eventually," he said, "would be that the state would pick up a larger portion of it, the same way the state picks up most of the expense for the universities. University students pay around 20 percent, but then the rest of the money for the state university system is picked up out of the state's general fund."

The college wants to hold the property tax assessment for its operation to $2.20 per $1,000 assessed valuation.

But, as Nicholson said, "We could control the tax rate, but we can't control the assessment. So we're trying to control all of the things we can control — one, our own expenses, and two, our own tax rate."

No matter how well it exercises that control, he said, the college still must get 80 percent of its operating tax revenue.

And then there's the problem of inflation.

If there is no change in the funding formula and the inflation rate keeps rising, when do the college's programs really start suffering?

"We really started to suffer in 1976, so we're past that point," Nicholson said. "Since 1976, we've been getting behind with our maintenance; we're getting behind with our new equipment; we're getting behind with our library — you know, collection and improvement.

"We've gotten behind with our benefits to faculty — our fringe benefits are less . . . than the rest of the community colleges in the state by a substantial margin . . .

"We haven't added new expenses or new programs," Nicholson said, referring to the aftermath of 1976-77 when the college last two serial levies and three one-year levies before gaining voter approval of operating funds.

If voters reject the levy Tuesday, the result will be a 20 percent loss in college revenue, Nicholson said.

"Specifically, we will have to cut about 500 classes out of the annual schedule and eliminate the equivalent of 100 full-time jobs," Nicholson said.

Other recommended reductions, he said, amount to 20 percent overall and would be based on "a priority system which preserves vocational-technical programs as our top priority."

Tuition would increase by about $10 - $15 per term, he estimated.

"What we're trying to do is maintain the programs, but what we would do is take out classes, sections . . . Those 500 sections represent a lot of evening classes, a lot of duplicate classes.

"And if we do that, that's why we lost students . . . If we're offering one class only at 10 o'clock in the morning and a student as a conflict — well, it will be more difficult for him to get a schedule."

The college estimates a 20 percent cutback would result in a reduction of 300 to 400 students, Nicholson said.

"That would have the impact of another $500,000 loss," he said. "The tax money, you see, is balanced — it's like front money.

"If you don't have your first money, from your local tax base, then you can't provide enough to get the maximum amount of state aid and student aid . . .

"So the loss is a downward spiral," he said. "If we come up with fewer students, then the following year the federal aid to the college is not as great."

A loss of 400 students would cost the college $500,000 in federal funds the following year, he said. "You see, the whole thing is a balance. Once you lose a part, it starts to domino — you lost other parts tied to it."

The Gresham area provides many part-time staff. These would be greatly affected by the proposed cuts. The equivalent of about 50 full-time faculty members would be dismissed, although some of them would be leaving anyhow because of retirement, leaves of absence of resignations.

"The yardstick, roughly, is that the college budget impacts the community somewhere between four and six times," Nicholson said.

If the $2.5 million is not approved by voters Tuesday, the loss, then, "will be somewhere between $10 million and $12 million to the community," he said.

Nicholson leaned forward in his chair and smiled. "You know," he said, "there's one thing that's particularly difficult to explain to people. "We've looked at some programs that might be cut out so we could save $10,000. But we lost $50,000 in income from that program. So that's self-defeating. And there are so many programs like that where, if you eliminate the program, it costs you more."

Since any cuts would be across the board, the MHCC athletic program would be affected by a loss at the polls Tuesday.

That may satisfy some critics, but Nicholson said it also could have an effect on enrollment.

"We haven't nailed down which ones yet, but some of them (programs) which have intercollegiate sports will disappear," he said. "But when we cross out the athletic programs, we find the athletic programs bring students and teach students."

Many activity programs are paid for by the students and not with tax dollars, he noted. And the student body's budget would be cut, too, if the levy fails.

"The cold hard facts," Nicholson summarized, "are we can't operate in the red. And the consequence of a budget levy setback, he said, is that "we're going to have to say we can't do as much.

"So, if we have money for one student, then we should take one student and do a good job," Nicholson said. "If we have money for one student and we take three and do a poor job for three, we haven't done our job. We haven't maintained priorities and we haven't been fair with our students."

All of that notwithstanding, the college has its work cut out, for property owners are showing they've had enough of taxes. And, as Nicholson said, one of their few avenues of protest is at the ballot box in school elections.