

BUILDING BOND

One outstanding issue is whether the 4J and Bethel school boards will put school construction bond measures on the May ballot that could compete with the city measure to fund school operations.

Under Oregon's complicated tax system, voters can approve as much local funding as they want for school buildings, but they are severely limited in approving property taxes to actually pay for the teachers and other operating costs to keep those buildings open.

District 4J Superintendent George Russell has said he's concerned that putting a proposed \$130 million construction bond measure on the same May ballot as a school operations measure could result in one or both measures failing due to voter confusion.

"It would be very difficult for me to recommend a bond measure on the same ballot," Russell told the School Board last week. "If the decision is made to put an income tax measure on the May ballot, by default that makes the decision about our bond measure, in my view."

"Putting the [construction] bond at the same time as the [city] measure will doom both," said Johnson of the school supporters group.

Delaying the school construction measure might mean that the district isn't eligible for \$15 million in federal matching funds. But the district may be able to use a portion of the city income tax funding to fund \$15 million in borrowing and/or may be able to borrow from reserves or the city to get some or all of the federal match.

HOW MUCH

The group of school funding supporters have asked for the city council to refer a measure that would raise about \$20 million per year for about four to six years.

The city has asked the 4J and Bethel school districts to provide figures on the amount of money needed to avoid increases in class sizes and school closure days, but the school boards have not yet discussed the issue in full.

Russell has included \$10 million to \$12 million in funding for 4J from the city tax in his proposed budget and about \$4 million has been proposed for Bethel.

Russell said he's concerned that asking for a large amount of money could hurt the chances the ballot measure will pass. But school supporters argue that the measure has to include enough revenue for a

significant reduction in class size increases and school closure days.

PROGRESSIVE

The city income tax for schools should have rates increasing with income similar to the progressive rates of the federal income tax, according to school supporters. The group suggested rates "such as 0.5, 1 and 1.5 percent."

The school supporters also said that the income tax should protect the poor by exempting those under "approximately the median-income level for Eugene, i.e., in the range of \$30,000 to \$35,000/year."

About 45 percent of Eugene residents would pay the proposed school tax, based on state data and assuming Eugene has a similar income distribution to Lane County.

The local proposal would have a lower threshold than the \$250,000 income floor for the State Measure 66 income tax increase, which passed by a 3-1 margin in Eugene last year.

Supporters could increase the income threshold to lessen the impact of the tax on those struggling in the down economy and increase its chances of passage without losing much revenue. For example, exempting incomes below \$70,000 would cut the number affected by the tax to about 20 percent while only reducing revenue by 32 percent, according to the state data.

STATE WAIT

School funding opponents have argued that school funding is not a city of Eugene problem, and that citizens should wait for a statewide solution.

But school supporters argue that the state has been under-funding schools for decades and doesn't appear likely to act.

"We've been cutting schools since 1993," said local state Rep. Phil Barnhart, co-chair of the House Revenue Committee. "The state of Oregon is not going to fix this problem anytime soon," he said. "The students we can take care of in Eugene, we should."

Newly elected Gov. John Kitzhaber hasn't proposed any concrete solution to school funding in his budget. The state Legislature is just starting to wrestle with a projected \$3.5 billion budget gap this biennium and \$10 billion over the decade. With the state Senate split closely between Democrats and Republicans and the two parties sharing power in an evenly split state House, gridlock appears more likely than increased school funding from the state anytime soon.



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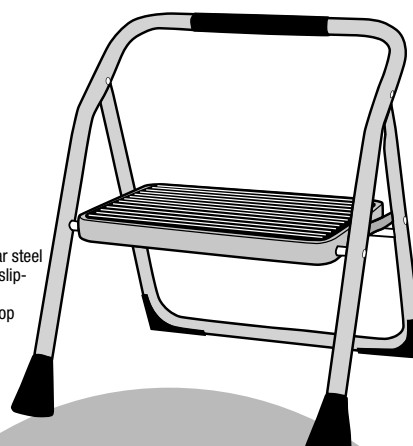
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