

School Fight

Campaigns kick off for and against local funding

BY ALAN PITTMAN

The battle for local school funding heated up this month with kickoffs for dueling campaigns for and against a \$17 million temporary city income tax to save local kids from the four-day school weeks and crowded classrooms that are threatened by massive budget cuts.

A local group of parents is leading the pro-schools campaign, "Strong Schools Eugene." The group says the measure will not only help kids but create jobs by attracting and retaining high-paying local employers who value education. The progressive income tax measure is endorsed by a diverse list of more than 220 local citizens including current Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy and Jim Torrey, former Eugene mayor and former chairman of the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce board.

The anti-tax group, Citizens for Jobs and Schools, says it hopes to raise \$100,000 to defeat the local school funding measure. The anti-school funding group has a private-school parent as its spokesperson, a developer

lobbyist from Yachats as its campaign manager, and is backed by an anti-government group, Americans for Prosperity (AFP), financed by the oil-billionaire Koch brothers and based in Washington, D.C.

There's little wonder Eugene's innovative local school funding measure has drawn outside opposition and national attention including coverage in the *Wall Street Journal*. The idea of cities competing for jobs, not with a race to the bottom in cutting taxes, but in providing good schools and other services, could be a powerful game changer if it spreads.

Strong Schools Eugene rallied about 200 cheering supporters, largely women and children, to pack the library of Kelly Middle School March 8.

Mayor Piercy called for citizens to support the "temporary targeted local progressive income tax" measure on the May ballot. "There's nothing more important to our kids," Piercy said.

"If we keep taking away from our public school system,

we may end up having one that does not prepare our kids for the future," the mayor said. "I felt and many people felt that we are sort of at a crisis point. We look to the state for the real resolution of the funding issues, but in the meantime this good community said, let's look to see what we can do together to bridge the gap, to hold back the bleeding, to stop losing and take care of our kids."

"Economists have written to us and spoken to us and said, you know, it is about our kids and their future, but it is about our city and our local economy, and it can't be successful if we don't have good schools," Piercy said, referring to a report from ECONorthwest economists showing that the measure would create jobs.

"Our children have to know that they matter so much to us that we'll do what it takes," Piercy said.

Local State Rep. Phil Barnhart couldn't get away from Salem for the rally but sent a letter that was read explaining why the city tax is needed. "Schools in Oregon have always been supported by local taxes and managed by local school boards," Barnhart wrote. "With the tax cuts that were adopted in the 1990s, the Legislature tried and failed to make up the loss."

"We cannot depend on the state to take care of Eugene students when it cannot even adequately fund statewide responsibilities like universities and health care for the poor. Strong schools are essential to the success of Eugene's children and our local economy," Barnhart said.

Sabrina Parsons, CEO of Palo Alto, a Eugene company with 43 employees making business plan software, hammered home the economic importance of schools to local jobs.

The funding measure "will keep our schools strong, and the stronger our schools are the stronger our economy is," Parsons said. "Nobody is going to come to a place like Eugene if the schools aren't strong."

Parsons said she chose to build her company in Eugene in significant part because of the "excellent education" local schools could offer her three children.

Palo Alto has created 20 new local jobs in the last two years, but the schools "picture is not looking so rosy," Parsons said. "We're growing, and we want to hire more people and it [schools] is the question we get when we are recruiting top talent."

"They're comparing us" on the quality of public schools, Parsons said of the employees she tries to recruit. "They are looking us up on websites and they are grading us ... That is a big way people we're recruiting are going to decide if they are going to move to Eugene," she said.

Parsons said some people want to wait for state action to fund local schools, but "we can't wait for the state to make it better. In four or five years, our schools are going to be in a dismal state."

She said others have argued that people might leave Eugene to dodge the local school tax, but "just wait to see what happens in four or five years if our schools are in the state they are going to be in, because people will move out of Eugene."

"As a business owner and as a parent, it is something that I will face," Parsons said of relocating her company for better schools. "I want the best education I can get for my three sons, and if I can't get it here in Eugene, I will have to make that decision, and as an owner of a business I can make that decision. I tell you, I get calls from Bend and Beaverton and Vancouver, Wash., all people wanting us to move our business to their towns. It is not something



ABOUT 200 SUPPORTERS GATHER IN THE KELLY LIBRARY



A GROUP OF ABOUT 20 GATHERS FOR THE OPPOSITION