

Story posted Wednesday, December 16, 2009

Residents, Board Member Against Dist. 64 Levy Hike

By DWIGHT ESAU Journal & Topics Reporter

In a sign of the times, Park Ridge-Niles School District 64's property tax levy approval was enlivened this week (Dec. 14) by comments from several angry residents and a no vote on the levy resolution by a board of education member.

A 2009 levy of \$56.9 million, about 4.9% more than last year's levy amount, was approved by the board in a 5-1 vote. Board member Sharon Lawson was absent.

The 64 board is asking in this levy for an amount that is less than the 5% ceiling placed on the district by the tax cap laws, but more than the district actually expects to receive from the Cook County Collector.

The levy is based on 2009 tax rates, and will be paid to the district in two installments in 2010.

Public school districts typically ask for more than they expect to receive, in order to capture as much new property coming onto the tax rolls in their districts as possible.

District 64 usually receives a slightly smaller amount from the Cook County Assessor's Office.

A property tax levy has no direct impact on a taxpayer's tax bill, which is a product of many factors, including a district's tax rate in any given year, and the assessed valuation of all property in the district, spread over all of its citizens on an equal basis.

District 64's levy represents slightly more than 80% of its revenues for the next year. Other sources of income are state and federal aid and grants, and user fees.

In the levy public hearing at 7:20 p.m. Monday, several district residents said they opposed the levy amount and objected to some of the district's activities and programs.

While some of the rhetoric was boiler-plate citizen frustration with high taxes in a bad economy, it also hinted at an obvious fact – there is a growing number of citizens who are dissatisfied with not only District 64, but with the State of Illinois, its huge budget deficit, and with the property tax system that is used to fund public education.

"Why can't you educate kids as cheaply as they do in private schools?" asked one. "And how much money have you actually gotten from your 2007 referendum that raised our taxes?"

Another one questioned the need for teacher unions, and said teachers are "too greedy."

A third one said there is as lack of math and science curricula in the district. "How will we compete in industry and science if we aren't educating our kids in these fields?" he asked.

Many of the things teachers consider as essentials today (laptops, foreign language instruction, fine arts, etc.) came in for sharp criticism.

Finally, board member Russ Gentile voted no, with an explanation that this was an opportunity for a modest budget reduction, and the timing is just not right to ask the residents for more money now.

In response, board president John Heyde said, "Our levy deals with local property taxes, not with state aid or the state's ability to help us."

"If we provided substantial tax relief to our citizens, it would result in substantial teacher layoffs, and this board doesn't want to add to the already severe unemployment problems."

The levy is broken down by fund, as required by state law. It projects a need of \$43.1 million for general educational purposes (including teacher salaries), \$6.5 million for operations and maintenance of facilities, \$1.9 million for transportation, sets aside \$1 million for a working cash reserve fund, provides \$2.2 million for staff retirement benefits, \$1.3 million for liability insurance, and \$439,500 for special education of disabled students.

The district currently projects a substantial surplus of several million dollars in its current budget, due to the increase in property tax revenues in the last two years made possible by the successful 2007 tax rate referendum.

The district serves about 4,300 students in grades K-8 who live in Park Ridge and the western and northern sections of Niles.