

School millage renewal to appear on November ballot

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP/MACOMB TOWNSHIP — Voters in Chippewa Valley Schools will be asked to renew a millage for businesses and nonprimary homes on Nov. 4.

Diane Blain, the district's director of school and community relations, gave an extensive presentation before the Board of Education at its Sept. 8 meeting. In it, she outlined the details of the upcoming 18-mill nonhomestead ballot proposal, which would renew the district's existing tax levy for an additional 10 years.

According to Blain, these 18 mills are currently levied by every public school district in Michigan on commercial and industrial properties, as well as on second homes and rental homes. For Chippewa Valley, the nonhomestead millage represents about \$11.5 million per year in revenue, or roughly 8 percent of its annual budget. It was last renewed by district voters in 2006.

"We're going to have a little bit of a job doing some education of our community," Blain told the seven-member board. "We're going to have some people in our community who have never voted for this (millage) before. So we'll be sending out a lot of information to them, so that they know this is not a tax on homeowners. That's going to be a message that needs to be loud and clear."

For a property with a market value of \$200,000, the nonhomestead millage would amount to \$1,800 per year in taxes.

The district's current 18-mill levy is set to expire on Dec. 31, 2014. Blain pointed out that district officials opted to place the millage renewal on the November ballot because if they had chosen to go before voters at a different time, it could have required a special school election. This would have cost district taxpayers an additional \$60,000.

Blain stated that to make sure voters are well-informed, the district would be reaching out to them via "a lot of different communication methods." These include its SchoolMessenger notification system, which provides phone calls, text messages and emails to district parents; its website and cable TV station; local media outlets; school newsletters; meetings; social media; parent groups; letters and flyers sent home with students; possibly, the TV stations of Clinton and Macomb townships; and the libraries and senior centers of those communities. Officials also plan to mail out a newsletter explaining the millage to 43,000 homes and businesses within the district.

"When you have strong schools, it just naturally equates to a strong community," Blain said. "We know that when you have a quality school district, residents stay there. We know that property values are higher in good school districts. We've got a fine reputation for excellence, (so) we know that this is a community that families like to move to and build homes in, and businesses seek to be here."

According to Scott Sederlund, assistant superintendent of business and operations for Chippewa Valley Schools, the nonhomestead millage proposal actually asks for 18.277 mills to be levied.

The additional 0.277 mills, he explained, are to offset any small rollbacks that may occur under Michigan's Headlee Amendment, which requires local school districts and units of government to reduce their millage rates when property values increase faster than the rate of inflation.

"We've had some minor rollbacks over the last few years," Sederlund said, "so we've actually had to reduce our rate from around 18.5 mills to the current amount (18.277 mills). If and when another Headlee rollback occurs, we will still have a little bit of cushion there to keep us at the full 18 mills."

Blain noted that nonhomestead property owners have been paying the same millage rate for nearly 20 years. She also stressed that these funds are essential to maintaining the educational programs that Chippewa Valley currently offers.

"If we didn't have this money, that would mean dramatically different services in our school district," she said. "It helps support our day-to-day operational dollars. These are critical funds to help us maintain the programs and services that we have now. ... A 'yes' vote (means) no additional cost to homeowners. And for people voting 'no,' (there will be) no reduction in their taxes."

Blain elaborated that if the Nov. 4 proposal is not successful, the district would have to go back to voters at a later date to ask for their approval again. This would also likely require officials to hold a special school election and all the extra costs that it entails.

Sederlund stated that if the millage were to fail, the loss of 8 percent of the district's budget would be "very significant" and would require making cuts to all areas of school programming.

"It's a very difficult number to try to live without," he said, adding that \$11.5 million is a large sum of money. "It would certainly have a huge impact on us. But I'm hopeful that we've done enough of these votes at this point that homeowners understand this is not going to increase their taxes."

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