

# Kitsap Sun

LOCAL

## SKSD board must decide this month whether to put levy before voters in February

**Chris Henry** Kitsap Sun

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**SOUTH KITSAP** — The South Kitsap school board on Wednesday discussed placing a school support levy on the February ballot. The local levy, formally known as an Educational Program and Operations Levy, would replace a levy approved by voters in 2017 that expires at the end of 2021.

The board made no decision on the timing or amount of the levy ask at Wednesday's meeting, but Superintendent Tim Winter said they'd need to do so at its Nov. 18 meeting to meet the state's Dec. 11 deadline to file a resolution for the Feb. 9 special election.

If the district waits to run the levy in April, uncertainty about whether it will pass would impact budget planning, Jennifer Farmer, the district's assistant superintendent of finance and operations has said.

The current levy provides for about 15% of the district's budget. Under state law, local levies are meant for "enhancement" or "enrichment" since the state is supposed to fully cover basic education.

Farmer said the levy is used to fill fiscal gaps for staffing and other expenditures district officials say are needed to provide a safe and equitable education for all students. The district also uses the levy to offer "competitive" salaries for teachers.

The district uses the levy to hire additional teachers for reduced class sizes, as well as nurses, librarians and school counselors. The state, for example, only funds 1.43 full-time school nurse positions, Farmer said. The district, with around 9,000 students, now has seven school nurses to cover 10 elementary schools, three middle schools and the high school.

The levy fills a funding gap for special education, which in reality is not fully covered under the state's allotment to South Kitsap, Farmer said. It helps provide for music and arts programs, sports and extracurricular activities, technology, and facilities cleaning and maintenance.

At Wednesday's meeting, the board also passed a resolution certifying the amount to be collected under the current levy in 2021. The 2021 total collection amount approved by voters in 2017 was \$25,520,460. The exact tax rate, given the total assessed value of properties in the district, would be an estimated one or two cents below the current rate of \$2.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value, said

board member John Berg, who has been in contact with the Kitsap County Assessor's Office.

Berg proposed reducing the total collection amount in 2021 to \$23,300,000, which would result in an estimated rate of \$2.30 per \$1,000. The reduction, he said, would be an acknowledgment of the pandemic's impact on education, which has been delivered through remote learning since mid-March. No sports, no in-person extracurricular activities, no students in buildings (except for the few special education students who started receiving in-person services in mid-October).

When voters in 2017 approved the levy measure, "they had certain expectations of what they were going to get for their money, and we have not been able to deliver on those expectations," Berg said. "There have been some savings because the schools have been closed for some period of time and there have also been some additional expenditures because of the COVID, but I believe we need to give the voters a break because they're not getting what they voted for initially."

A tax rate decrease of 20 cents would save the owner of a \$300,000 home \$60 a year. At the \$2.50 per \$1,000 rate, the same homeowner would pay \$750 per year.

Board member Liz Sebren said she opposed the proposed reduction, noting the estimated rate voters approved in 2017 was actually higher than \$2.50 per \$1,000. The estimated rate on the ballot was \$3.73 per \$1,000.

Education funding reform bills passed since then have led to fluctuations in rates. In 2019, the local levy rate was capped at \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value as part of the "levy swap" when the state took on a significantly larger share of K-12 funding.

The Legislature walked the cap back to \$2.50 per \$1,000 after some districts across the state lobbied for more taxing authority. South Kitsap last year took full advantage of the change, which resulted in a large tax increase for district property owners in 2020.

Sebren argued the board shouldn't second guess voters who approved the estimated \$3.73 per \$1,000 rate in 2017.

"I don't believe it's our job at the moment to change that vote," she said. "They'll have a chance to remove that when and if we ask for another levy."

Farmer, in response to a question from one board member, said the district will likely be using about \$7 million from its reserve fund to make up this year for a shortfall in enrollment because of the pandemic.

Berg said COVID-19 has impacted families and the district should acknowledge that. He also wanted to improve the chances of passing the levy measure in 2021.

"If we're going to come before voters in February and ask for another levy, I think we need to show a little restraint," Berg said. "And I'd rather take a small hit now than risk rejection of a full levy in

February."

Sebren, Rebecca Diehl and Eric Gattenby voted in favor of collecting the full \$25.5 million that would result in a rate of approximately \$2.50 per \$1,000 (the final rate is yet to be calculated by the Assessor's Office but can't exceed \$2.50 per \$1,000). Berg and Jeff Daily were opposed.

The board also approved a total collection in 2021 of \$5,476,220 for the capital levy approved by voters in 2018. The estimated rate on the ballot was 67 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. The actual rate in 2020 was 59 cents per \$1,000 because the total value of properties in the district was higher than projected in 2018 and the tax burden was more widely spread.

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