

## **Community team works together to recommend solutions to R-7 School District financial challenges**

***R-7 is already cutting \$19.5 million this school year; additional \$6 million in cuts will be needed in future to address state funding losses***

The Lee's Summit R-7 School District Citizens' Advisory Committee has been working throughout this fall to examine solutions to the district's financial challenges. Lee's Summit R-7 has made dramatic budget cuts over the past three years as a result of reductions in state education funding and declining local revenue due to lowered property assessments.

Beginning in 2008, the R-7 School District began extensive cost-containment efforts that totaled \$1 million as part of Phase I cuts in 2008-09, \$9.5 million during Phase II cost-containment in 2009-10 and \$19.5 million during this year's Phase III efforts. The 2010-11 cost containment is approximately 12 percent of the R-7 budget.

The financial crisis is compounded by growing enrollments and rising costs in areas such as fuel, utilities and benefits, including state-mandated retirement contributions. Cost-containment measures enacted this school year include:

- Reductions in administrative, instruction and support staff positions totaling 103 employees
- A district-wide salary freeze
- The implementation of combination classrooms (two grade levels in one class) at the elementary level to equalize class sizes while reducing staff positions
- Reductions to the elementary summer-school program
- A teaching schedule change requiring high-school instructors to reduce their planning time and teach an additional course each day
- Ongoing reductions of program, school and department budgets district-wide
- Deferring of maintenance.

During the time that the district has eliminated more than 100 staff positions to address funding reductions, it is also growing, gaining 262 students this fall with district-wide enrollment increasing more than 500 since fall 2007.

The budget cuts have been designed to have the least possible impact on students while ensuring that the district remains fiscally solvent. With state projections showing even more significant losses in state funding in future school years, R-7 officials and the Citizens' Advisory Committee worked together to study the district's financial challenges throughout this fall.

The R-7 Board of Education has already approved \$19.6 million in cost containment for next year's budget but an additional \$6 million in budget cuts will be needed to make up for further reductions in state funding and continuing losses in assessed value. Compounded with the \$19.5 million already cost contained by the district during this school year, these additional budget cuts would have a more negative impact on students and would result in further elimination of school staff members, rising class sizes, the possibility of additional combination classrooms at the elementary level and reductions and/or elimination of some district programs for students, including both instructional and extra-curricular (sports and other activities).

Despite the district's solid long-term financial planning and significant cost containment measures, the increasingly deep losses in funding have been especially challenging. The R-7 Citizens' Advisory Committee has been meeting throughout the fall with representatives from each school's PTA to prioritize additional cost-containment for the next two school years. The

approximately 100-member group will conclude this work Nov. 30, and a community presentation about these additional budget cuts is planned for 6:30 p.m. Dec. 15 at the Lee's Summit North High School performing arts center.

At this presentation, community members will have the opportunity to provide written feedback on the proposed cost-containment measures. After Dec. 15, the R-7 website will also include information about the team's budget-cutting recommendations and the opportunity for electronic feedback. Staff members will also have opportunities to submit feedback electronically.

In addition to thoroughly examining the cost-cutting side of this challenge, the R-7 Citizens' Advisory Committee studied solutions that involved enhancing revenue for schools. The citizens' group has examined the possibility of a recommendation for an operating levy increase two times over the last three years, deferring this recommendation until this fall.

At the Nov. 18 Board of Education meeting, Citizens' Advisory Committee members recommended that an 89-cent operating levy be placed on the Feb. 8, 2011, ballot. The recommendation came at the conclusion of a study that included a comprehensive review of the Lee's Summit R-7 financial challenges, cost containment already enacted, projected additional losses in future state and local revenue, enrollment trends and a community-wide survey. Following this presentation, the Board of Education voted in favor of placing the issue before voters. If approved, the 89-cent levy would be applied to each \$100 of assessed valuation and would result in a property-tax increase of \$28 per month for the owner of a \$200,000 home.

During the Board of Education meeting, the Citizens' Advisory Committee representatives stated that approval of the levy issue by voters would:

- Maintain the quality of programs and services for R-7 students
- Allow the district to avoid most of the approximately \$6 million in additional cost containment in 2011-12 and 2012-13
- Eliminate a portion (although not all) of current cost-containment measures
- Limit further class size growth
- Protect R-7 property values by ensuring continuation of our quality educational system
- Limit elementary combination classrooms in the future
- Provide resources for the district to work toward its goal of comparable salaries for teachers and staff members.

Most importantly, the citizens stated during the presentation, approval of the levy issue would allow the R-7 School District to continue its legacy of excellence for all students.

The R-7 Citizens' Advisory Committee has served as an advisory council to make recommendations to the Board of Education since its establishment in 1952. The group includes parents and non-parents as well as representatives from the R-7 Board of Education, district staff, the Lee's Summit Educational Foundation, Economic Development Council, Chamber of Commerce, PTA, higher education, health care and small business.

**NOTE: The levy issue was defeated by voters on Feb. 8, 2011.**

