

In Kettering, The 6.9 Mill School Property Tax Proposal Might Help Inspire Activation Of New Grassroots Group

On this May 4 ballot is a proposal to increase Kettering school property tax by 6.9 mills, a 16.4 % increase in school property tax. This letter gives background information about this levy, and asks the question: **How can Kettering develop a great future for its system of public education?**

This letter suggests creating a grassroots citizens group -- starting in this precinct -- to discuss and study issues concerning public education in Kettering and to work to elect new members to the Kettering Board of Education.

Dear Neighbor:

Friday, April 23

Thank you in advance for reading this letter and seeking to understand a neighbor's point of view. I'm hand delivering this letter only in this precinct, where I live, to see if there is grassroots' interest in creating a new Kettering citizen's group. (The on-line version of this letter — posted on DaytonOS.com and on CitizensTogether.com — contains links where you can find additional information.)

When the **4.9 mill new school tax** was approved in November, 2007, the superintendent at that time, Robert Mengerink, said the district would not need to ask for new money for four years. This **6.9 mill tax proposal for new money** on the May 4 ballot, is being presented to the public 18 months earlier than projected just two and one half years ago. Last May, 2009, the school district approved a **6.9 mill renewal**.

In the space of two and one half years, voters in this district have been asked to approve three levies with a total of **17.7 mills** in taxation for the school district.

The Marketing Campaign

The marketing campaign for this 6.9 mill levy is impressive. Based on previous campaigns, this levy campaign will cost over \$15,000. The money comes from a registered Political Action Committee (PAC) called "Citizens for Kettering Schools." This PAC uses all the tools of marketing science, including targeted mailings. Since I am in the senior citizen's age group, I got a letter from two respected Kettering oldsters, Jim Trent and Chet Rousch, urging me, as a senior citizen, to support the levy -- reminding me that seniors get free tickets to all Kettering athletic and performing arts events. Younger voters got a different letter sent to their house.

The Kettering PAC has a narrow focus -- to pass school tax levies -- and, by definition, it represents a **"special interest."**

This Kettering PAC is funded mostly by individuals who have a personal financial stake in maintaining a generous income flowing to the school system. The teachers' union is the biggest contributor to the PAC and the bulk of other contributions come from school employees. The school board has approved a policy to allow all Kettering school employees to donate to this PAC via payroll deductions. In Kettering, all teachers are required to join the teachers' union -- or pay a similar fee, even if they don't join. Union dues cost \$690 each year.

The Five Year Forecast

The need for 6.9 mills of new revenue for Kettering Schools is based on a five year budget forecast -- that shows without additional revenue the district will go deeply into debt. The biggest item in the budget -- personnel expense -- is projected to increase by **4.82% each year**, for the last three years. This level of increase, evidently, anticipates the new revenue that will be needed to reach agreement with the teachers' union for a new three year contract. Since money budgeted for personnel comprises **86% of the budget**, the compounded percentage increases in personnel expenses, anticipated in the five year budget forecast, requires the district to find millions of dollars of new revenue.

The five year projection shows that benefits paid to personnel are 36% of salary, so, on average, for every \$1000 is salary, the school district pays \$360 in health and retirement benefits. The "average" teacher's salary is in excess of \$68,000. And the last fifteen administrator contracts averaged \$103,000 per year.

Reasons for increasing teacher pay in Kettering should be explained to the community as the rationale for asking for additional taxes. After all, the district should be rightfully proud that it pays teachers, on average, more than any other district in the county.

How to Make Kettering Democracy Work?

Last May, three board members voted to approve a new two year contract for teachers. Board president, Jim Trent, and board member, Frank Maus, opposed the contract. Trent gave this reason for his "No" vote for new pay increases for teachers: "I can support all the components of the negotiated agreement with our teachers except the pay increase. After receiving feedback from many of our citizens, observing the latest economic news, and giving this topic an unbelievable amount of thought, I have reached the conclusion that because of the current economic turmoil, the time is not right to approve an increase in pay for anyone."

Of the three board members seeking reelection last November, Frank Maus was the only member who opposed the new contract and he was the only member who was defeated. The *Dayton Daily News* credited teacher union opposition for Mr. Maus' defeat.

David Matthews of the Kettering Foundation makes the observation that in order for a community to have a strong system of public education, it must have a strong democracy. In a system of "local control," the public interest in public education would be advanced through an elected board of education that would positively engage and inform the public and invite the public as stakeholders into full partnership.

A system of local control means we must have an active grassroots democracy that can unite and represent the Kettering community concerning this key matter of our system of public education. We need a community grassroots organization that will represent the general public and will serve as a balance to the "special interests," the Kettering Political Action Committee, that now seems to have too much influence on Kettering's public education.

Last Year's 6.9 Mill Renewal Campaign

Last Spring, 2009, the school system passed a **6.9 mill renewal levy**. The advertisements for this levy promised that by approving this renewal, there would be "ZERO Increase In Tax." Letters sent home with school children from their principal said that approving this levy would result in "**not a penny more**" of tax.

However, the "effective" tax rate for this 6.9 mill renewal levy last year was 6.16 mills and by approving a renewal, taxpayers gave authorization for this effective rate, if necessary, to return to its original amount of 6.9 mills -- a 12% potential increase in effective rate. This 6.9 mill renewal was set to raise \$8.2 million each year. The effective rate of taxation varies according to the fluctuation of the value of the total tax base. After this 6.9 mill levy was originally approved in 2004, because of an increase in the total value of the tax base, the effective rate eventually decreased from 6.9 mills to 6.16 mills. Now, because of the ongoing decline in the total value of Kettering's tax base, effective tax rates are increasing. This fact was never explained in any of the levy marketing. The effective rate this year of the 6.9 mill renewal levy is **6.18 mills**, up .02 mills from last year's rate -- not a huge increase, but not a ZERO increase.

The "ZERO Increase In Tax" advertisement made a good marketing slogan, but it was misleading. (You can read here -- <http://daytonos.com/?p=8016> -- how this marketing was defended.)

Last year, Kettering residents paid property tax at a total effective rate of **68.40 mills**. This year the total effective rate is **70.34 mills** -- an increase of **2.8%**. Of that total millage, last year, 41.14 mills went to Kettering Schools. This year, 42.11 mills goes to Kettering Schools -- a **2.34% increase** in school property tax from last year to this year.

As long as the value of the total tax base in Kettering continues to decline, even without approving new taxes, individual property owners will be required to pay at an increased rate in order to generate the revenue guaranteed by current levies.

Why I Ran For The Kettering School Board

I was offended that last year's 6.9 mill renewal was marketed as a "ZERO Increase." I knew that approving this levy would mean that the effective tax rate for Kettering properties, in fact, would increase. I was not bothered by the fact that I might need to pay a few more dollars in property tax. I was bothered that elected board members would approve a levy campaign focused on delivering misleading advertisement. I determined to become a candidate for the Kettering School Board and spent \$700 of my own money in the effort. I received 4481 votes -- not enough to win, but, I thought, a respectable showing.

A thirty year career in teaching left me convinced that public education needs big changes. I was a high school teacher in West Carrollton. I was an officer in the teacher's union. Everyone experienced in the system of public education, who makes an honest evaluation, realizes that the system, itself, is the biggest impediment to making the big improvements in public education that our society so very badly needs.

I believe that the public education currently provided by the Kettering community is heads above that offered in many other communities. But it is not nearly good enough. The push for system change must come from the public.

“Excellence,” according to the state government is demonstrated, if 75% of students show minimum competency on objective tests. Excellence in public education at one time meant much more than it does now. A vision for change that can gain public support, I believe, requires a new and inspired vision of purpose. Kettering, as a local community, I believe, has the capacity to show leadership in vitalizing public education with a vitalized purpose. In my campaign, last Fall, to be elected to the Kettering Board, I provided this statement for The League of Women Voters voters’ guide:

Public education needs a big leap in quality — including a big leap in cost effectiveness. We need a ten year process of transformation that will result in a 21st century system of education. Community consensus is needed. Leadership is needed. The biggest challenge for the Kettering School Board is to lead the community in creating a shared vision of the future, and, in creating a well-thought out, long-term plan to bring that vision to reality.

Kettering Should Be A Leader In System Transformation

Kettering, I believe, has the capacity to find consensus and to work cooperatively within the current system to make a much better system -- one that will bring new and expanded opportunities for teachers, students and parents -- one that will be transformed with new energy, purpose and accomplishment.

The present system is topdown, bureaucratic, hierarchic, regimented, and test driven. We must have a vision of the future that imagines something much better. We need to invent a new system of public education, and what better place to make a breakthrough in system innovation than in Kettering, Ohio? The very name, “Kettering,” speaks of invention, engineering, creativity. Kettering should seek to be a leader in reforming public education.

The central question is: Can we make our local democracy in Kettering work? The system of public education will not reform itself. The push for transformation must come from the public. **We need a system public education that will produce much higher quality at much lower cost than what we have in the present system.**

In 2011, two seats on the Kettering Board will be up for election. I’m considering running again. But I’d prefer to support two candidates who emerge from a viable citizens group and who agree on a long term plan for system change and who have grassroots’ support.

In Kettering, we need a nonpartisan citizens’ group to study and make a proposal for long term system change, a group to develop plans and nurture candidates. We need to develop a viable grassroots group who will work to elect new members to the Board of Education.

Sincerely, Mike Bock 3808 LeFevre Ave Precinct: Kettering 4-K

If you would like to encourage this effort, please e-mail me:
MikeBock@citizentogether.com. Or leave a message: **937-985-3737.**

Please spread the word: Tell other Kettering voters that this letter is posted at my web-sites:
DaytonOS.com and **CitizensTogether.com**