

No Standing News

Since we have no standing, we stand with those left standing.

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The "Spin Room"

Rolla School Board Prepares to "Spin" April Levy Increase

By the middle of March we will be hip-deep in another school tax levy campaign. We will again be told to "Do it for the Kiddies." This is the marketing cliché used to put a guilt trip on voters in the hope that they will set aside common sense long enough to cast a sympathy vote and raise their own taxes. This time the school board has set up a "Spin Room" to counter opposition before they have even voted on what needs to be "spun." The school board has yet to determine what will be on the ballot, but whatever they decide, it will probably be on the April ballot.

The levy campaign actually began this summer shortly after the seven members of our school board were told that they were about a million short in their budget. Why a school district with a fairly predictable annual state and local tax income didn't have a clue that they were going to have such a huge deficit is a mystery we can't yet explain.

How Much Increase? At the public meetings and the November 29th Business Partners luncheon, Larry Ewing, Rolla Superintendent of Schools, previewed several levy increase "Scenario's" that the board had not yet voted on. **Scenario #1** is "Do Nothing" and he will eliminate 30 teaching positions next year in addition to the 6 teachers that were eliminated this year. (It always gets our hackles up when

someone makes a threat first and then asks for a big expensive favor. There are more tactful ways to present those alternatives.) **Scenario #2** is an 80¢ increase in the current \$3.07 property tax levy, which he says would only provide the money needed through 2005. **Scenario #3** is a phased-in levy increase of 40¢ the first year, another 20¢ the second year and another 20¢ the third year for a total of 80¢. After the third year of the phased-in increases the school levy would be \$3.87 thereafter. **Scenario #4** is a levy increase of \$1.20, which would increase the \$3.07 school tax levy to \$4.27. The proposal for a \$1.20 increase is not at all realistic and is probably just a tactic to make people stampede in fright to endorse the "smaller" .80 cent levy. Another tactic Rolla school superintendents have used before.

After Larry Ewing declared a state of financial emergency to the board this summer, he then explained that there was no way out but a big levy increase or big teacher cuts - to prove it he eliminated six teachers. So our alarmed and slightly befuddled school board stampeded straight down the chute he had prepared for them. They appointed a "select" committee of 50 "Business Partners" (have you noticed that everything is a "Partnership" these days?) so the Business Partners could "do lunch" and be indoctrinated by administration with carefully selected statistics, proving that there was only one thing to do - help pass a tax levy. The board has also held three public meetings to "communicate with the public" and see how the

non-select, tax-paying public would react to a levy increase. The only communication at these meetings, however, was between school administrators and an audience that was wildly enthusiastic about paying more property taxes for salary increases. Their enthusiasm was due to the fact that each audience was about 95% school staff or relatives of school employees, all of who expect to benefit from the raises. It sounded much like a school pep rally before the big game. The small handful of taxpayers present (who would not get a salary increase) were somewhat more skeptical - so much for testing public opinion.

They're Going to Build a What? Ewing then did a weird thing. In the middle of public meetings to discuss increasing our property taxes, he announced a \$3 million project to build a new addition to the already brand new Vo-Tech building! The project will be financed by a \$1.5 million state appropriation through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) that has to be matched dollar for dollar. His plan is to get a \$1 million loan for construction and a \$100,000 telecommunications grant from USDA and toss in \$400,000 in cash from the school district to come up with the \$1.5 million cash match for the state money.

The compelling need for expanding the just-completed Vo-Tech building is that local dentists are short on dental hygienists and are having to pay high salaries to hire them. If the local Vo-Tech can produce more, it will flood the market

with dental hygienists, dentists can hire them much cheaper and thus keep more profits for themselves. To assist the dentists in this enterprise, Ewing proposes to move the dental tech school (training provided by East Central College) from their present planned location in the new Vo-Tech building to the newer 31,750 square foot Vo-Tech building he is planning to build at \$69 per square foot. The rest of the space will be filled up with a child development facility with a \$125,000 kitchen and \$45,000 of pre-finished cabinets. Did they originally underestimate the space needed in the first new Vo-Tech building and now have to do another \$3 million addition to get it right? If so, that would mean the school board and administration is guilty of very bad planning - not the best image when asking voters for more of their money to spend. We have never heard of these expansion plans before or the need for more dental technicians or a day care clinical facility. Is this project suddenly "needed" just because the state made half the money available?

All but one (Ralph Wilkerson) of the seven school board members voted to go ahead with this \$3 million building project in the middle of a "We Need More Tax Money" campaign. It's encouraging to see that at least one board member is using his head and hasn't entirely lost touch with the public. Deciding to build a \$3 million project while telling us they have no money is not only a glaring contradiction, it shows a lack of strategic judgment that raises questions about the board's overall management. It looks like we have another group of elected officials who have wound up working for the guy they hired.

The School Board is Right Behind Him - literally. At the public meetings the board members seem indecisive about this whole thing. They sit among the audience and let Superintendent Ewing and Leonard Westbrook (Deputy Super.) answer all the questions and present selected figures. (One of the statistics that Ewing doesn't dwell on is that he is

paid \$105,000 a year.) Do our elected board members sit in the audience because someone told them that it would look less formal? Can they not answer the questions themselves, or are they trying to distance themselves from his presentation? Whatever the reason, they just look like they're hiding. School board members (when the few who speak up do say something) mostly just give generic support to the idea that they need money to hire teachers because, they say, there is a teacher shortage. It's quite noticeable that they defer all questions requiring a detailed knowledge of school finances to Ewing and Westbrook.

Why Not Take His Advice? For the last couple of years, Dr. Gerald (Jerry) Cohen has been diligently doing what the rest of us didn't want to devote the time to do - examine the school administration claims that they needed more tax money for first one thing and then another. At first he was quite sincerely attempting to confirm that they did indeed need a bond issue for a fourth elementary school and he wanted to convince the rest of us to support them. But what he began to find out was that the administration's so-called facts weren't quite as they were presented. He has since publicly called upon the school board to appoint an objective group to do their own examination and present their conclusions either for or against the board's levy proposals. He has repeated this advice at their public meetings and received a resounding silence from board members. Since the board bombed on their previous attempts to get a levy increase, one would think they would be ready to take his advice and appoint the committee he suggests, but it doesn't look like they will. Putting their fate in the hands of an independent citizens audit group shouldn't be that much of a risk if what Ewing says about having no alternative but a levy increase is the unvarnished truth.

Instead they have chosen to arrange lunch with a "select committee" of handpicked Business Partners (been

there, done that too), and have packed "public" meetings with cheering tax beneficiaries. Next comes the media barrage. Ewing announced at the November 29th meeting of the Business Partners that they have already set up a "Spin Room" to deal with any negative letters to the editor. "Spin" instead of straight talk - just what we need from our local school board after being bombarded for a year with sleazy "spin doctoring" from presidential campaigns. It's not too late for our school board members to pull this out of the tactical mess it is becoming. But to show us that they are in charge and know what they're doing will require a lot of hard work. Is the board convinced enough of their case to work that hard?

Your school board members and their terms:

Annie Bass
Elected 1993, 1996, 1999
(term expires in 2002)

Mindy Kippenberger
Elected 2000 (term expires in 2003)

Bill Peach, Treas.
Elected 1998 (term expires in 2001)

Dana Rapier, Pres.
Elected 1996, 1999
(term expires in 2002)

Randy Stratman, Pres. Elect.
Elected 1993, 1996, 1999
(term expires in 2002)

Tammy Wiese
Elected 1998 (term expires in 2001)

Ralph Wilkerson
Elected 2000 (term expires in 2003)

Decisions are made by those who show up!

SILENCE EQUALS CONSENT

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