

Edwardsville School District in dire need of added funds after Prop. E failure

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EDWARDSVILLE - After **Proposition E** was voted down by voters in the **Edwardsville School District**, **Superintendent Lynda Andre** and her board of education are worried about the future of the district.

During the Nov. 28 meeting of the **Edwardsville Board of Education**, Andre presented to the board the district's future options regarding the failed Prop. E, and the repercussions of each choice. The proposition would have increased the maximum

annual tax rate of the district up from 2.15 percent to 2.70 percent, or an additional 55 cents, increasing the taxing rate of a home with an equalized assessed value (EAV) of \$100,000 from \$4.19 to \$4.74. It was defeated by slightly more than 1,000 votes in the Nov. 7 election. Without that tax increase, Andre said the financial matters of the Edwardsville School District may be absorbed by the **State of Illinois** by 2019.

The three options given to the board by Andre regarding Proposition E were to do nothing, to attempt to place the measure on the March 2018 ballot or to place the item on the April 2017 ballot. If the third option was chosen, Andre told the board they would have to pass a resolution by their Jan. 9 meeting in order to meet filing requirements.

Placing the proposition on the April 2017 ballot was the least disastrous, according to a presentation given to the board by Andre. If the district was able to get the proposition to a ballot again, she said it would have a chance to provide several improvements to its students including: new textbooks, updated curricula, an online learning management system for the high school, less extracurricular activities and clubs, an updated security system and new technology-based learning materials. Andre said the district would be in no danger of having its financial matters be under the management of the state.

That danger comes from the Edwardsville School District's position on the state's **Financial Watch List**; a position it has held since 2009. Andre said the district has no cash reserves and its education fund is approaching a \$6.7 million debt. The district's negative operating funds have subjected it to increased financial over-watch by the State of Illinois by 2019. Andre blamed the state for many of the financial dire straits of the district.

"We have suffered a \$7.5 million loss since 2008 because of state funding," she said during a presentation. "That has given us a cumulative loss of \$46.8 million since then."

Adding to the burden of state funding woes is a stagnant property value. In her presentation, Andre illustrated the EAV growth in the district stopped in 2009. Property tax has been unchanged since 2008. Andre said the EAV growth this year is as much as three percent lower than last year's.

To combat these troubles, Andre told the board the district has made several sacrifices since 2008, and will continue to do so until the district is financially solvent. Those cuts have included a reduction in operating costs of an estimated \$14 million, 101 positions being removed with 75 of those being teachers, a district-wide salary freeze, issued \$9 million in working cash bonds and, most recently, tried to pass Proposition E.

If the district waits to place the proposition on the March 2018 ballot, Andre said the worry of the state taking over the financial matters of the district still exists. The improvements the district wants to make would wait until the 2019-20 school year. Students would also face larger class sizes and still lose many extracurricular activities if this option was chosen, Andre said. She said the cash reserves would not be replaced until 2023, and the increased debt taken by the school could amount to as much as \$10 million.

Andre's least favorite option was doing nothing. That option may not be entirely the choice of the board, however. Currently the board is "doing nothing" because voters decided to go against Proposition E. If voters make the same decision in April 2017, if it is again taken to a ballot, the board would again have to choose to "do nothing." The same is true if it made its way to the March 2018 ballot and did not pass.

"We have to find out from the voters what part of our story we're not getting out to them," **Board Member Paul Pitts** said. "We have our work cut out for us when telling that story."

If nothing is done, Andre said all the district's anticipated improvements would be on hold indefinitely. Andre said the cash reserves would remain depleted and the district would have to continue the cycle of borrowing with increasingly higher interest costs until the State of Illinois would likely take over the district's financial matters in June 2019.

"The board of education has difficult decisions to make, meaning reduction and elimination of programs and services that will impact students if the education fund does not receive sufficient funding to support its current operation," Andre said.

Assuming Proposition E made its way to the ballots and the district could convince voters to accept it, Andre said it could contribute an additional \$6.9 million to the education fund, which is "exactly what it was before," according to Andre's presentation. Of that \$6.9 million, \$1 million would go toward technology and security upgrades, \$2.7 million would keep the education fund balanced, \$1.7 million would go towards eliminating debt and \$1.5 million would offset the increasing costs of expenditures.

One upgrade the district is currently unable to provide is an online learning management system. Andre said many high schools, and every college, uses systems for its students. Through the system, students are able to see class schedules, review questions, do

homework and even view digital copies of their textbooks. Andre described it as "the next step for tech," and lamented at the fact students are graduating from the Edwardsville School District and are not skilled with the system upon entering college.

"Five or six years ago when students graduated, they had training on the systems as a freshman," Andre said. "That training is over - it is now an assumed skill. Our 2015 and 2016 graduates who went to college went without a necessary skill."

That system would be integrated into the high school's curriculum after a hypothetical passage of Proposition E. After implementation in the high school, Andre said it would be added to both Lincoln and Liberty middle schools.