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School funds debated

Provo District is seeking tax increase for education projects

By [Laura Hancock](#)

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PROVO — The Provo School District Board of Education seeks ballot-box approval that would allow them to raise taxes for school-related projects.

One measure asks permission to issue \$35 million in bonds for two new schools and remodeling and upgrades at existing schools.

The second measure asks for permission to increase the voted leeway to generate an extra \$1.5 million.

If the bond and leeway are both approved by a majority of voters on June 27, property taxes on a \$100,000 house would increase \$65 over a three-year period.

Voices in favor

About 13,000 children attend school in Provo, a city with a population of about 115,000. So if the majority of the city's residents do not have children, why should they care about the local school system?

"Because they're citizens of this community and they live here," Provo School District Superintendent Randy Merrill said.

Additionally, Merrill said, "Good schools sustain a city."

Schools help keep high the property values of nearby houses. Good schools attract good families, the superintendent said.

"So schools become anchors for neighborhoods and communities," Merrill said.

Merrill points to surveys taken in 2004 that showed a majority of Provo residents wanted "neighborhood schools" within walking distances of most homes. People who took the surveys had attended open houses the district hosted to gather information for its 10-year planning blueprint.

William Sederburg, president of Utah Valley State College in Orem, supports Provo's bond issuance and leeway increase proposal because he believes it will help the overall economic health of the area.

"Provo needs highly educated people to drive the economy," said Sederburg, whose wife is a employee of the Provo district. "It's not important just for the city, but for the whole city and the region."

Voices that question

Merrill and other administrators from the district pleaded their case in May to the Utah Taxpayers Association.

The association has taken a neutral position on Provo district's bond election, said Mike Jerman, association vice president.

In general, the Utah Taxpayers Association approves of Provo School District's budget in which 74 percent of funds are spent on instructional needs such as salaries, benefits, textbooks.

The taxpayers association, however, does object to the timing of the election. "Bond elections should be held in November when voter turnout is higher," Jerman said.

Ten to 20 percent of registered voters across Utah are expected to vote in next week's primary.

In Provo, turnout could be higher than normal for a primary because of the competitive 3rd Congressional District race between Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, and John Jacob.

"When you have off-season elections, generally the outcome is driven by special interests — not by the voice of the people," said Sen. Curt Bramble, R-Provo, who also has not publicly stated his position on the bond.

Bramble praises the district's gains to pay off debt and redesign the budget so money is allocated in categories such as building maintenance.

But he does not believe all the bond construction projects are critical. Trying to satisfy voters with capital improvements in every section of the city "may not be the most effective fiscal policy," he said.

Voices in opposition

Provo is home to Brigham Young University and thousands of students who rent homes and apartments throughout the city.

Those homes and apartments are owned by people who will feel the tax increase more deeply than other Provo residents.

Owners of businesses and second homes are taxed at 100 percent of the property tax rate, while other homeowners are taxed at 45 percent of the tax rate.

Julie Durrant and her husband own two apartment buildings in Provo. But her opposition to the bond is about more than money, she said.

Durrant does not believe the district has explored other options, such as schools with extended-day or year-round schedules or changing boundaries to balance school sizes.

Durrant and Provo resident and business owner Dan Thomas question the commonly held belief that Provoans want neighborhood elementary schools within walking distance.

They note that the surveys were not scientific but only taken by residents, mostly parents, who had children in the district's schools.

Thomas notes that busing is cheaper than increasing taxes and "there are so many neighborhoods in Provo that don't have enough kids (for a neighborhood school), they have to be bused anyway."

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