

The Journal's View: Spokane voters should support school replacement levies

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Staff Report

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School district funding has been thrown into upheaval by changes at the state level in recent years. New rounds of replacement levies are important steps toward stabilizing funding for those districts in the next few years.

Consequently, voters should cast ballots in support of levies requested by school districts throughout the Spokane area. Those ballots should arrive later this month and are due by Feb. 9.

Spokane-area voters have a long, consistent history of supporting education through the approval of levies. The business argument for doing so is clear: Quality K-12 education strengthens the workforce pipeline for many sectors, providing the quality job candidates that employers are seeking.

Employers often look at the quality of education systems—and whether a community supports schools—when evaluating a region for expansion or relocation. On an individual level, top talent often does the same thing, looking at the quality of school districts as a factor when taking a new job. To remain competitive, the Spokane business community should support levies, which continue to fund essential services within school districts.

Levies pay for services such as school nurses and special education, among a number of others. Depending on the district, the funds provided by levies account for 12% to 18% of their operating budget. In all, they account for a total of 700 positions throughout the region.

Thirteen of 14 Spokane-area school districts are seeking approval of replacement levies, which would continue to provide funding that voters approved in 2018 and that is due to expire at the end of the year. East Valley School District, the one district not sending out ballots this year, is on a different levy cycle. Its voters approved a replacement levy last year.

Proponents of the levies point out the levies will be the same amount or less than the amounts voters approved in 2018. Whether that leads to steady or lower taxes is complicated by the state's funding adjustments in the wake of the McCleary Supreme Court decision, which required the state to pay for a greater share of overall education costs.

In Spokane Public Schools, for example, the levy tax rate will be lower than it was in 2018, but higher than it has been the past two years. This is due to the state capping more stringently the maximum levy rate for school districts before raising that maximum last year.

There's plenty to criticize about how the state handled its "McCleary fix," and we've used this space to voice concerns about state lawmakers' approach to education in the past. Ideally, they'll continue to look for ways to hone both their definition of basic education and how they shoulder that funding burden.

For now, though, school districts and the children they serve need a stable path moving forward, and the levy replacements are the best way to accomplish that.

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