School district, community respond to 4A’s failure

Locals donate property tax share they would have paid if measure succeeded

By Erika Alvero (https://the-journal.com/)

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The Re-1 school district’s proposed tax increase failed this November, and the district is trying to figure out how to move forward in its push to attract and retain teachers.

Ballot Measure 4A sought to raise 5 mills – a little under $2.9 million annually – as a way to increase teacher salaries, with the goal of ultimately bringing in and keeping high-quality educators. It failed, though, with 45% voting in favor of the measure and 55% against it.

Superintendent Lori Haukeness said she was disappointed with the result, adding that the Montezuma-Cortez Re-1 School District would have to look closely at its budget in the coming year.

“Obviously our first and foremost priority and greatest concern and challenge right now is having highly qualified teachers in the classroom,” she said. “And with not only the state shortage, but the nationwide shortage, we have to be able to hire – not only hire, but be able to retain our current teachers that we have who are teaching our students.”
The board decided in May [https://the-journal.com/lms/loading.html#rotfwetu=aHR0cHM6Ly8veWJvL3d3dy5nb29nbGUuY29tLw%3D%3D&ibothsahtrtd=aHR0cHM6Ly8veWJvL3d3dy5nb29nbGUuY29tLw%3D%3D&ibothsahtrtd=aHR0cHM6Ly8v] to seek a mill levy override, after much deliberation. A previous attempt to pass a similar measure in 2017 failed, and last year the school board chose not to put it on the ballot, saying the timing was off.

This year, the district’s messaging emphasized the need for Re-1 to be competitive with neighboring districts, in order to attract quality teachers and reduce teacher turnover – in the 2018-19 school year, the district’s turnover rate was about 24%, compared with a statewide rate of approximately 16%.

In recent years, Cortez teachers have begun commuting to Durango or Shiprock, where starting salaries are $8,000-10,000 higher, Haukeness said.

The property tax increase would also have gone toward new security measures, like paying for law enforcement security for after-school events, assisting with funding school resource officers, and funding a part-time school safety specialist.

At a Nov. 19 board meeting, staff and board members thanked the measure’s supporters and campaign organizers – and the community members who have taken it upon themselves to donate to the district what they would have paid in property taxes if 4A had passed.

Susan Ciccia, the district’s nursing director, presented the board with a check for her portion.

“And I wanted to give you a commitment that I’ll do this for as long as I live in Montezuma County,” she said.

She said she had been inspired by a few Letters to the Editor submitted to The Journal in recent weeks. Gene Taylor [https://the-journal.com/lms/loading.html#rotfwetu=aHR0cHM6Ly8veWJvL3d3dy5nb29nbGUuY29tLw%3D%3D&ibothsahtrtd=aHR0cHM6Ly8veWJvL3d3dy5nb29nbGUuY29tLw%3D%3D&ibothsahtrtd=aHR0cHM6Ly8v] wrote, “In the Montezuma-Cortez School District, the measure failed. However, 2,250 citizens voted in favor of the increased funding. Perhaps those who voted in favor of the funding increase would consider donating their share to the Cortez Public Schools?”

According to Melissa Brunner, the district’s finance director, the mill levy override would have amounted to an additional $36 per year for every $100,000 valuation.

Before the election, though, there were also a few letters submitted that opposed the measure, arguing that taxpayers should not be responsible for teacher salary increases, and that although a wage gap exists between Durango and Cortez, the higher cost of living in Durango made up for that gap.

“So do we need to raise real estate taxes on the large number of retirees, on a fixed income that is less than the lowest salary bracket, by 25% to further widen the gap?” wrote Bud Garner [https://the-journal.com/lms/loading.html#rotfwetu=aHR0cHM6Ly8v].

Montezuma-Cortez Middle School teacher Cody Childers, a strong proponent of 4A, spoke at last week’s board meeting. He asked board members to push State Sen. Don Coram, R-Montrose, and State House Rep. Mark Catlin, R-Montrose, to advocate for more school funding at the state level.

“We now have a teacher emergency on our hands,” Childers said.
Board President Sherri Wright said she had already spoken to both Coram and Childers.

Rankings vary depending on source, but Colorado ranks low in terms of educational spending regardless of the measure. According to the nonprofit Colorado School Finance Project, in fiscal year 2016-17 Colorado was 40th in the nation in terms of per pupil spending, $2,392 below the U.S. average.

A high number of school districts throughout the state have turned to a four-day week, both to save money and as a way to attract teachers. According to Tracie Rainey, executive director of the CSFP, in October 2018, 104 districts (58%) throughout Colorado had one school, some schools, or all schools on a four-day week.

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