

School board mulls tax levy

Provincial cuts expected, local education budget shrinks

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The public has never responded well when Medicine Hat's School District No. 76 has tried to initiate a tax levy. But with a provincial budget looming — one that many fear could mean deep cuts to the public education system — the school board is once again considering asking taxpayers for more money.

In November, the public board approved its 2009-10 fall budget update, which included a \$445,000 operating deficit. That was largely due to mid-year clawbacks and grant reductions from the cash-strapped provincial government.

The board was able to dip into its reserves to cover that deficit, but it fears what might happen in 2010-2011.

"We are concerned," says board chair Gitta Hashizume. "We've been hearing for months now about the downturn in the economy, the millions they (the province) have to find overall in the budget, and so until we hear what's actu-

ally in the budget, we are concerned."

In the mid-90s, when the province took away the taxing ability of local school boards, the government introduced an option giving boards the right to hold a plebiscite allowing them to wage a tax levy to raise funds for a specific project or initiative. The plebiscite has to be held on the date of school board elections, which are coming up this year on October 18.

While Hashizume says nothing is finalized and the board doesn't even know what project the levy would support, it's a possibility they are considering. On Tuesday, the board reviewed the official timeline of actions they would have to take to organize a plebiscite.

"(We got) the timelines to see when we'd have to consider the different steps if we want to move forward," Hashizume says. "At this point, we haven't made a decision."

Historically, the board has held three plebiscites for a school tax levy, and each time its attempts were soundly defeated at the ballot box — most recently in 2004, when 78 per cent of voters rejected the elimination of school fees.

That levy proposed to raise \$4.5 million over three years, and would be charged on a property tax basis, working out to \$61.68 per \$100,000 of property.



Hashizume

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DATE: FEB 04 2010

Specification: SECOND.
FRONT PAGE: _____

INSIDE PAGE: A3