

Thank you, voters. Thank you for paying attention to the special election coming up on May 7 for Proposition A. The high early voter turnout numbers, and all the community conversation surrounding Prop A, show what we know already: that we all care about our schools and we want them to be fairly funded.

We just don't agree on how to get there.

The opposition is thinking short-term. Specifically, using reserves of saved money to patch our budget together.

Those who support Prop A are thinking long-term. We want reliable, stable funding for now and the future to allow for better school district planning and more careful cuts.

Since 2015, the **borough** has funded the school district between \$49 million and \$54 million dollars annually. Last year, the assembly gave \$50 million and then added \$4 million to that from one-time funding, for a total of \$54 million.

This year the assembly again budgeted \$54 million. But the school district is asking for \$64 million.

Mayor Ward sponsored the ordinance to put forth Prop A as a way to fill the \$10 million gap in the current school budget. As the mayor stated on page 8 of this year's budget packet: "We should fund the services we expect to have and budget for what we can afford. Stability in government services depends on the shift away from relying on one-time funding. We cannot rely on one-time funding for operational expenses."

Yet Prop A opponents argue repeatedly that Prop A is not needed. That the **borough** already has all the money we need for another one-time fix to fill that \$10 million hole.

Voters, please. Look closely at what opponents are arguing and decide for yourselves.

Argument: The school district has \$8 million in reserves. They can just use that.

Fact: The school district spends about \$18 million a month in expenses. They should have at least that much in savings.

Argument: The **borough** has \$9.5 million in the general fund balance. They can just use that.

Fact: If we spend our **borough** reserves and surplus we're just kicking this can down the road. And taking away the school district's ability to plan from a reliable budget for future years.

Argument: The **borough** can sell land to start an endowment to fund schools. They can just use that.

Fact: To provide \$10 million dollars annually for schools, you'd need a \$250 million endowment (you shouldn't plan for more than a 4% distribution annually). Opponents have referenced 70,000 acres that the **borough** could sell today to start building an endowment. However, in review of the available land, there is only 12,000 acres available to sell. And that's not worth \$250 million.

Argument: This is not an emergency and there's no need for a special election; let's wait until October to fund our schools.

Fact: School starts in August. Not in October. The school board has already recommended cuts for the upcoming school year, including the closure of Ben Eielson Jr/Sr High School and increasing all class sizes by one student (except for kindergarten). Even with these cuts, there's still a \$10 million hole in the budget.

One-time funding makes school planning impossible. We understand that the school board must make cuts

to our school system — minimizing those cuts that impact student performance the most — things like teacher retention, class sizes, and student activities. Reliable school funding is needed so the schools can plan for responsible and reasonable cuts.

Argument: The **borough** pays high taxes already.

Fact: As shown on page 118 of the Fairbanks North Star **Borough** budget for 2025, the 2023 Assembly cut the **tax** levy by \$10.5 million, which was \$27 million below the **tax** revenue **cap**. This action caused our **tax** revenue **cap** to automatically decrease by \$20 million. This \$20 million reduction to our **tax** revenue **cap** is shown on pages 560 and 899. Prop A would restore only half of this **tax** cut.

Argument: Times are tough and costs are high. People can't afford more property taxes. And renters can't afford higher rent.

Fact: If Prop A passes, and the Assembly only uses property **tax** to raise the \$10 million for **education**, that would equal just \$100/year more in taxes for every \$100,000 in property owned. Prop A won't raise your rent; landlords will raise your rent.

Copyright (c) 2024 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. All Rights Reserved.