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Growing school district in a jam

Adams 27J struggles since voters rejected bonds, tax hike in '05

By Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News

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BRIGHTON - The state's fastest-growing school district is struggling to maintain services, six months after voters turned down a tax increase and refused to authorize bonds for more buildings.

"It's very serious," said Ernie Lopez, the school board president for a district that covers Brighton and parts of Commerce City and Thornton in central Adams County. "We're growing at 10 percent - approximately 1,000 students every year."

The 215-square-mile school district used to be called Brighton District 27J. No more. Now it's just District 27J, reflecting the fact that most of the new students live in subdivisions popping up on land annexed by Commerce City.

The district grew from 5,643 students in the October 2000 enrollment count to 10,477 in October 2005, an 86 percent increase.

School officials were stunned by the double defeat at the polls in November. The bond issue would have paid for three elementary schools and a middle school, while the tax increase would have covered rising operating costs.

The district is now busing students from fast-growing areas to empty seats elsewhere in the district. Three elementary schools will go on year-round schedules in the 2007-08 school year. Remaining elementary schools will follow in succeeding years.

The school board will almost certainly go back to voters in November, asking them to reconsider a tax increase and bond issue, Lopez said.

"We have no choice," he said.

Request still up in air

School officials have not decided how much they will ask voters to approve. Bonds to build schools and funds to operate them must be approved as separate ballot items under Colorado law.

Nancy Burgess, the district's budget director, tells citizen groups that the only alternative to a tax increase is for the district to buy a winning lottery ticket or win big at a casino.

"In this job, I need to keep a sense of humor," Burgess said.

Burgess held two sparsely attended sessions with citizens in March to explain the district's budget woes in preparation for the expected vote.

At the heart of the problem is that revenue for the district under the state school finance formula is growing at 3.1 percent, far below enrollment growth.

Under state law, voters in a school district may tax themselves beyond the amount set by the formula.

Unless voters take that step, all of the district's new state money for next year - \$5.6 million - will be eaten up by automatic pay increases for workers, along with the cost of 32 more teachers to handle enrollment growth, Burgess said.

Voters in 27J last approved a tax increase to cover operating expenses in 2000.

Then, the additional money came to \$133 per pupil. After five years of growth, the same tax rate brings in only \$68 per pupil, Burgess said.

Among Denver-area districts, only St. Vrain Valley School District in Longmont brings in less through voter-approved taxes.

By contrast, Denver Public Schools brings in \$726 per pupil and Jeffco Public Schools raises \$898 in revenue per pupil above state funding, according to Burgess' research. The Boulder Valley School District, the district with the most generous voters, brings in \$1,226 per pupil above state funding.

District 27J voters in 2004 approved bonds to construct a new high school. But operating costs to open the new school next fall - everything from maintenance crews to electricity - come to \$2.6 million.

Former school board member Tom Janich, one of the few people who openly opposed the ballot issues last fall, says the problem is that the state has not come up with a way to finance schools in areas experiencing rapid growth.

Turning down a tax increase again in the fall will force elected officials to address the problem, said Janich, who refers to himself as "the most fiscally conservative person" in Brighton.

"It's tough love," Janich said. "It's like a drug addict. If you keep giving them money and bonding them out, they'll never get straight."

He would like developers to pay for new schools.

Busing eats up money

Brighton City Councilman Dick Hodge calls Janich's approach "very shortsighted."

Hodge said money spent to bus kids to empty seats around the district would better be spent on teaching.

"I love buses," said Hodge, who used to drive a school bus. "But I don't think busing is where you should put your education money."

Letting schools deteriorate affects the economy of the entire community, Hodge said. He calls schools "the key to all economic development."

Crowding at Brighton High School has become a nuisance for everyone, Hodge said. Some students, out of school by early afternoon, are on the streets unsupervised until their parents get home.

Brighton police Chief Clint Blackhurst said officers are seeing more graffiti and vandalism as well as fights. It's not clear if the increases are due to changes to class schedules or just the fact that there are more kids around.

The new Prairie View High School opens in the fall, which will help with some of the problems, but Brighton High School will continue to operate at capacity.

Rejection a mystery

Why voters turned down the ballot items last November is not clear.

There were no public opinion polls, and precinct-by-precinct results are unavailable since votes were cast at centralized election centers.

Adams County is traditionally hard on taxes. Referendum C, a successful statewide tax-limit override, failed in Adams County.

Some people speculate that "empty nesters" such as senior citizens torpedoed the ballot items, but others argue that a grandparent vote helps schools.

Tammy Carr, of Brighton, a businesswoman with children in elementary and high school, said the ballot items went down last fall because proponents didn't start campaigning early enough.

Carr was active in the successful 2004 bond election to build a high school. But she wasn't even aware until late in the 2005 election season that an item was on the ballot.

"We need to start hitting people the second we come back (to school) in August," Carr said.

Melissa Schultz, a stay-at-home mom who volunteers more than eight hours a week at Second Creek Elementary School, didn't vote in November.

Schultz had recently moved into Reunion, one of the new developments that are part of Commerce City, and had not registered.

Schultz has children at Second Creek in kindergarten and second grade. It is one of the most crowded schools in the district, with just under 900 students.

Schultz said she just assumed people would approve bonds to build schools for all the people moving into the community.

"It was just common sense to me," she said.

Some home buyers may be misled by the fact that future school sites are identified by signs in the new developments, Schultz said.

But salespeople don't always explain that the schools won't actually be built unless voters approve the bonds, she said.

Schultz said she'll work to pass the bond issue and tax increase in the fall. If the issues go down again, she'll consider moving to another district.

Voter support

Funding from tax hikes and bond measures approved by voters in different school districts varies widely. Some selected districts in the metro area:

- District 27J in Adams County.....\$68 per pupil
 - Denver Public Schools.....\$726 per pupil
 - Jeffco Public Schools.....\$898 per pupil
 - Boulder Valley School District.....\$1,226 per pupil
- Source: Nancy Burgess, Budget Director For District 27j*

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