

A comment I often hear about school levies goes something like this: “It’s always one levy after another. There’s an operating levy and we approve that, then they ask for a Permanent Improvement levy, then a bond levy, and it just goes on and on. It never stops.”

Last week I promised in my column that I would always talk straight to the community about our school district and everything it does. So my response to the feeling expressed above is this: That’s absolutely right. That is the school finance system in Ohio.

We do, in some years, have an operating levy on the ballot. The funds from operating levies pay salaries, benefits, and daily operating expenses, like fuel and electricity. Over time those costs increase, and so while we stretch the money as far as we can, eventually we have to go back to the voters and ask for more.

A Permanent Improvement levy, like the one we have on the ballot next month, is different. It’s not for salaries and benefits or daily operating expenses. It pays for things that typically last longer than five years. These include school buses, textbooks, computers, major repairs like roofs and boilers, and capital equipment like freezers and refrigerators. Our current Permanent Improvement levy expires on Dec. 31, 2008. That’s why we have another one on the ballot this year.

And a bond issue is used to build new schools, which we don’t do very often. We will, though, need to fund school construction at some point in the future. Here is when each of our schools originally opened:

1929 – Central Elementary
1952 – Fairfield Freshman School
1954 – North Elementary
1958 – West Elementary
1962 – Fairfield Middle School
1972 – South Elementary
1978 – Fairfield Intermediate School
1997 – East Elementary, Fairfield High School

Our last operating levy was four years ago. Our last Permanent Improvement levy was five years ago. Our last bond issue was 14 years ago. It’s very frustrating then, when I hear people say, “...and every year they’re back on the ballot asking for more money.”

We’re still living on that 2004 operating levy. Based on our treasurer’s latest forecast, we can probably make it for another two years. Stretching an operating levy for six years is something that’s achieved by doing what taxpayers expect us to do...tighten our belts, and watch every penny. We do it every day.

One way we measure how efficiently we’re spending district funds is to compare ourselves to other districts. There are 49 public school districts in the Greater Cincinnati

area. When you list them by how much they spend, per student, we are very near the bottom, at No. 44.

We don't spend nearly as much as others, but our schools are clean and safe, we have an "excellent" rating from the state, we have an outstanding group of teachers, and we have great employees supporting those teachers and our students. I appreciate all the support the community has given us in helping achieve that.

Published in the Fairfield Echo, October 9, 2008.