

VALLEY

School levy a sound investment, officials say

By KRISTI ALBERTSON
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Supporting Kalispell Public Schools' building reserve levy makes financial sense.

That was the message from school officials and members of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce at the chamber's regular monthly luncheon Tuesday. School officials presented information about the levy, which will cost taxpayers about \$6 million over five years. Voters will decide the issue next week.

Levied money will pay for maintenance for buildings and technology in the high school district, which includes nearly 638,000 square feet and 87 acres, Superintendent Darlene Schottle said. That means the levy comes to about \$2 per square foot over five years, she added.

School board trustee Brad Eldredge, who is also an economist, called the levy a sound investment.

"The building reserve is a

good investment. It will keep our tax base growing and our overall tax rate low," he said.

Maintaining quality schools is important to the Flathead Valley's future, Eldredge added.

Jobs that were hardest hit in the recession were those that "didn't require a lot of education," he said. But jobs requiring at least an associate's degree have grown during the downturn.

"I think that will be a trend. We won't see a huge return in construction or manufacturing. ... In the future, there will be a need for an educated work force," he said.

KALISPELL SCHOOLS already are helping make sure students are prepared for the future, Assistant Superintendent Dan Zorn said. He said Kalispell's students are second only to Bozeman when it comes to reading and math scores. Students also perform well by international standards.

In one assessment, test scores from 100 randomly chosen Flathead High 15-year-olds were compared to scores from 15-year-olds across the nation and in about 65 other countries. Flathead students' reading scores were as high or higher than every other group but Shanghai, China, Zorn said.

Research suggests that maintaining a safe, healthy environment helps students achieve at a higher rate, Schottle said. The building reserve will help the district maintain and improve its safety, particularly at Flathead High School, which needs significant fire safety upgrades.

About \$900,000 would be put toward a fire suppression system at Flathead to bring the building up to code.

The district could have made some improvements to Flathead's fire safety when voters in 2004 approved the \$50.7 million bond issue that built Glacier High School. Instead, a committee of school personnel and community members rec-

ommended some bond money be used to "do something for the original high school," Schottle said. "We had to give something to that community."

The money was used to build the commons area at Flathead.

Some have questioned whether the district should have instead used the money to take care of Flathead's safety needs. Eldredge called the decision a "sunk cost" — a fixed cost that cannot be undone.

"Whether the choices are good or bad, they're made. We built a second high school. We remodeled what we remodeled," he said. He urged chamber members to "think forward into the future."

IN ADDITION TO building upgrades and maintenance, the levy will pay for technology needs. It won't buy a computer for every child, Schottle said, but it will provide upgrades to the district's phone system, software and online security.

If the levy fails, the district

will have to rely on its general fund budget to pay for upgrades and repairs, which officials estimate will cost about \$433,000 a year. That would give Kalispell schools a minimum \$900,000 shortfall next year, Schottle said.

The levied money can only be used for building and technology needs; it cannot be used in the general fund budget.

Realizing the money would not go toward salaries or operations helped convince the Kalispell Chamber to support the levy, said Terry Kramer, chairman of the chamber's government affairs committee. Chamber members also were swayed by the school district's need to take care of its capital.

"We've got to protect the assets of this community. [A school] is a hard fiscal asset. We need to maintain Flathead High School," he said.

Reporter Kristi Albertson may be reached at 758-4438 or by e-mail at kalbertson@dailyinterlake.com.