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LEVY WOULD HELP NEEDY CHILDREN A \$50 MILLION MEASURE WOULD SET ASIDE PORTLAND PROPERTY TAXES FOR KIDS PROGRAMS

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Researcher Lynne Palombo of The Oregonian contributed to this report.

Illustration: 2 Photo by Benjamin Brink - of The Oregonian staff

Volunteer grandmothers, soft-spoken teachers who regularly visit their students' homes, nutritionists, parent advocates, tutors working in classrooms that strive to create a calm "home atmosphere" -- the Early Head Start center at Northeast Portland's former Normandale school is a parent's dream.

It's also expensive, at \$10,000 a child, and full to capacity, part of why 600 low-income infants to 3-year-olds countywide remain on the Early Head Start waiting list. Thousands of Multnomah County children eligible for the service aren't getting it.

Backers of children's programs are trying to dent that shortfall and others this November with a \$50 million Portland *children's levy*. The measure would raise property taxes to fund child-abuse prevention, after-school and mentoring programs and pre-kindergarten education programs such as Early Head Start.

The initiative, apparently the first of its kind in Oregon, would put Portland among a small group of cities nationwide, including San Francisco and Seattle, that have set aside money for children's programs.

Child advocates say it would mean the city is beginning to walk its child-friendly talk.

"There is a perception that we are this progressive city," said Cynthia Wells, executive director of Early Head Start Family Center of Portland, which includes the Normandale site.

"When it comes to children's services, we are not. This initiative is the best way that Portland can begin taking direct responsibility for children's

services."

The initiative had a \$230,000 campaign fund at last count and is endorsed by hundreds of groups and individuals, from Elders in Action to Nike to T. Allen Bethel, senior pastor of Northeast Portland's Maranatha Church. Last weekend it was the featured topic at 60 Portland congregations.

Supporters concede the initiative heads to the Nov. 5 ballot with important details still to be worked out. It's not clear which groups would get the money, what a 5 percent set-aside for administrative expenses will cover and exactly how backers will fulfill the initiative's promise to pay for only "proven programs."

The initiative, which will join parks and library levies on Portland's ballot, could also face taxpayer fatigue in a down economy. "It's a tough environment out there," Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman said.

But Saltzman, who spearheaded the City Council-referred initiative, said his volunteer work on a citizens board that reviews cases of children removed from their homes has convinced him that more needs to be done.

"You just see the hell that some children live in," Saltzman said. "It's unbelievable."

"If we don't treat the children right now, they're going to treat us the way we treated them," said Bethel, the senior pastor. "I'll have to pay increased taxes as well, but I think the return on my investment is going to far outweigh the cost."

The levy would boost property taxes to raise \$10 million a year for five years. At 40.26 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation, it would cost roughly \$60 a year for the owner of a home assessed at \$150,000.

Saltzman pushed to have the levy apply only in the city, not all Multnomah County, arguing that the city's more liberal voters were more likely to approve it.

But tentative plans are for the county, which handles most social service functions, to administer the children's investment fund that the initiative establishes.

Funding decisions would be made by a five-member allocation committee comprising a city politician, a county politician and three citizens, including one appointed by the Portland Business Alliance and two experts in child services. The county commission and Portland City Council would approve the committee's decisions.

Money for proven programs

Money would go only to proven programs, the initiative says, and administrative costs would be capped at 5 percent of the fund, or \$500,000 a

year.

With funding decisions not yet made, backers can't say how many children the initiative would serve. But \$2 million a year to Early Head Start would cut a third of its waiting list.

Sending \$5 million a year to after-school programs could provide quality after-school care for all Portland's middle schoolers and half its elementary students, according to supporters. Federal matching money and private donations tied to the levy dollars would further increase the children served, they say.

Richard Anderson, chairman of Multnomah County's Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission, said he agrees it's crucial to reach children early. But the commission, set up to review government expenditures in the county, has concerns about the lack of detail in the proposal.

Supporters shouldn't have used the loaded word "proven" in ballot language without a definition, Anderson said. It will be difficult to keep the program under its 5 percent cap on administrative expenses and conduct both financial and performance audits. And supporters should have hashed out the standards for who would receive funding in advance.

"It makes it hard to sell to the voters when it's kind of like, 'Well trust me,' " Anderson said.

Saltzman conceded the levy supporters have not "dotted every 'i' and crossed every 't.' " But the allocation committee will spell out what "proven" means, he said; at a minimum, it means the money will go to established programs, not pilot projects.

Financial audits covered

The 5 percent administrative cost will cover financial audits and perhaps an extra county staff person to work with the allocation committee, he said. Performance audits might not get done.

"It's going only to programs with proven track records," Saltzman said.

"There's no bureaucracy being created; there's no money going to a black hole in government. That's what I think people will vote for."

A study on Early Head Start released last year found a "consistent pattern of statistically significant, modest, favorable impacts" from the program, which serves infants to 3-year-olds. Children and their parents improved 10 percent to 20 percent in categories such as children's language development and parents' ability to support their children emotionally.

Colleen Morrison, a parent at the Early Head Start center at the Normandale school, said she has seen both effects. Her son Liam, who has Down's syndrome and other health problems, has made substantial progress in his year at the center and the staff's teaching and health skills "just rub off" on

parents.

Liam is "learning all the small things that are getting him ready for the school system," she said. "It's fantastic to see."

Seattle voters passed the city's first *children's levy* in 1990 and renewed it in 1997, providing \$69 million for social support programs. San Francisco didn't raise taxes, but voters earmarked a specific percentage of property taxes for children in 1991, overwhelmingly renewing that commitment for 15 years in 2000.

Crime report will be used

If Portland's levy passes, the allocation committee will likely look toward a 2000 Citizens Crime Commission report that identified proven programs, including Early Head Start, Head Start and the Portland Relief Nursery for parents of high-risk preschoolers. (The Oregonian's publisher, Fred Stickel, was co-chairman of the committee that created the report.)

Jim Jeddeloh, a business leader and the crime commission's chairman, said one-time remedies don't work to reduce crime -- and public expenses -- in the long term. The crime commission will "get crosswise" with the city if the money isn't spent on the most at-risk children, beginning with prenatal care and continuing through childhood.

But Jeddeloh said he "absolutely" supports the initiative. It saves money by working through existing programs and preventing bigger costs down the line.

A 1998 Rand Corporation report concluded that every dollar spent on early childhood programs will yield long-term savings of \$2 to \$4 in expenses such as reduced prison costs, though the payoff varies widely among programs.

"This isn't a feel-good thing," Jeddeloh said. "This is making investments to reduce the long-term cost of crime."

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