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In the 2016 general election, a proposal for an excess school levy appeared on the Pocahontas County ballot. The levy proposal was defeated by a margin of 2 to 1. The Building Consensus Committee, a group of county citizens not affiliated with the Board of Education or school system, conducted a study to understand why it failed.

The study consisted of two parts: a series of focus groups held with community organizations, and a questionnaire. After asking whether each respondent voted for or against the proposal, the questionnaire had two broader sections. The first measured the degree of support or opposition for the five major parts of the levy proposal; the second asked respondents to comment on the reasons they either supported or opposed the levy. The questionnaire was distributed to focus group attendees, school employees, and the general public (via a random mail survey of 450 residents who voted in the general election).

We were disappointed that residents who voted against the levy were much less likely to respond to the mail survey than those who voted for it. Whereas, two-thirds of *actual voters* in the 2016 general election voted against the levy, only about a third of *survey respondents* said they voted against; the results were the same for each of the two mailings we conducted. Therefore, we are unable to say how closely the tallies of responses shown in Part 1 of this report align with those of the general public. The numerous thoughtful comments we received (which are discussed in Part 2 of this report) provided the most surprising and enlightening views on issues affecting the levy.

Part 1 – The Data

In the first major section of the questionnaire, we asked respondents to indicate the degree of their support or opposition to each of the five major parts of the levy proposal – using language that appeared on the ballot. In the table below we have tallied the responses to this section of the questionnaire by (1) all respondents, (2) school employees vs. all other respondents, and (3) respondents who voted *for* vs. those who voted *against*. (Note: The number of respondents in sub-groups may not add up to the total number of respondents because not everyone answered every question.)

Major Parts of School Levy Proposal	Responses	All Respondents n=210	School Employees n= 80	All Other Respondents n= 130	Voted FOR n= 120	Voted AGAINST n= 67
A. Major improvements and renovations to Green Bank Elementary/Middle School, including roof replacement, new HVAC, replacement windows, electrical upgrades, new science classrooms, and fire alarm upgrades	Support	81%	80%	81%	92%	63%
	Oppose	10%	12%	9%	2%	24%
	Neither	9%	8%	10%	6%	13%
B. Close Marlinton Elementary School and move students to Marlinton Middle School. Make necessary improvements to MMS to accommodate MES students including new classrooms, cafeteria and kitchen additions, new HVAC, electrical upgrade, new lighting, intercom, and lockers.	Support	59%	68%	54%	68%	43%
	Oppose	27%	26%	31%	19%	44%
	Neither	13%	9%	15%	13%	14%
C. Move 7th and 8th graders from Green Bank Elementary/Middle and Marlinton Middle Schools to the high school.	Support	34%	32%	33%	45%	11%
	Oppose	53%	54%	54%	36%	84%
	Neither	13%	14%	13%	19%	5%
D. Major improvements to Pocahontas High School. Initial improvements to be funded by excess levy and completion dependent on the receipt of a School Building Authority Grant.	Support	74%	80%	74%	91%	46%
	Oppose	13%	7%	15%	3%	39%
	Neither	12%	13%	11%	7%	16%
E. Primary sources of funding for the proposal would be an excess levy on real estate and personal property taxes of 1.9 million dollars a year for five years, plus a 11.6 million dollar grant from the WV School Building Authority.	Support	62%	62%	61%	86%	23%
	Oppose	25%	26%	26%	3%	65%
	Neither	13%	12%	14%	12%	12%

Some observations about the data: First, 81% of all respondents *support* major improvements and renovations to Green Bank Elementary/Middle School, including nearly two-thirds (63%) of those who voted *against* the levy. This issue is a clear winner for any future levy proposal.

Second, a majority (53%) of all respondents *oppose* moving 7th and 8th grade students to the high school, including a whopping 84% of those who voted against the levy. This issue is a clear loser for any future levy proposal.

Third, 74% of all respondents *support* major improvements to Pocahontas County High School, including nearly half (46%) of those who voted against the levy. This point is remarkable because the levy proposal did not include information about which improvements would be made, or the project cost and schedule. This issue could be a winner if a specific plan were presented to voters.

Fourth, while a majority of respondents (59%) *support* closing Marlinton Elementary School and moving students to an expanded facility on Beard Heights (where Marlinton Middle School is now located), respondents who voted *against* the levy were evenly divided (43% support and 44% oppose). Given that two-thirds of *actual voters* in the 2016 general election voted *against* the levy, such soft support for closing MES should be considered carefully in any future levy proposal.

Fifth, while about two-thirds of respondents (65%) who voted *against* the levy were also opposed to raising property taxes, the remaining third (35%) indicated *support* for increased taxes or were neutral on the matter. This seeming anomaly will be explored in Part 2 of the report.

Finally, there is *no significant difference* in response patterns between voters who are school employees and those who are not. Support or opposition to each of the levy's major parts is either identical or very close for both groups. It would appear that school employees, as a group, reflect the sentiment of the community at large regarding the levy proposal.

Part 2 – Respondent Comments

Even though *survey respondents* indicated support for most of the levy's parts, the data suggest that other factors may be at work which caused *actual voters* to be against the overall levy proposal. We believe answers can be found in respondents' comments – which go beyond the merits (or demerits) of the levy's stated purposes. Most comments summarized here were expressed multiple times and in various ways – but the general sentiment was clear. In all cases, we have tried to shield the source from discovery and preserve the survey's anonymity.

Mistrust of the Board of Education and Central Office: According to survey respondents, the principal reason the school levy proposal failed in the 2016 general election is voters' widespread lack of trust and confidence that the Board of Education, Superintendent, and central office staff can be relied on to spend additional money wisely or for the intended purposes. This view was expressed by members of all sub-groups of respondents, including those who voted for and against the levy proposal. A significant portion of respondents expressed contempt for the central office. A common belief is that central office staff works a short day and gets paid extra money to do what should be their job in the first place; payment of supplements to secretaries is viewed as a waste of money that could be used for maintenance or other expenses. Respondents feel there is a lack of accountability, and the views of teachers and the general public are ignored or rejected without serious consideration.

Mistrust is pervasive among survey respondents. Many said, "I do not trust the Board Office" before adding comments about poor planning, fiscal mismanagement, lack of truthfulness, and the failure to maintain school facilities. The feeling is that the school system is run by people who put their own self-interest ahead of the interests of students, teachers, and the schools. Many respondents believe that some school administrators are unqualified for their positions and "secretaries" are paid several times the average wage in the county. Unless and until these perceptions change, many respondents said they would not vote for any future levy proposal even though they agree that county schools need more money.

Maintenance: Mistrust of the Board and school administration is heightened by a sense of sadness and disbelief that maintenance of school facilities was deferred and neglected for so long that buildings are now regarded as crumbling and cannot be fixed. Many comments acknowledge that schools are in serious need of repair and upgrading but then say the problem is failure to maintain the buildings we have (due to lack of care and planning) rather than the need for new buildings. The idea of throwing away buildings that haven't been properly maintained offends many respondents who use the analogy of maintaining a house or car if one expects it to keep operating.

Maintenance is seen as a constant issue for which there should be a long-term maintenance plan and an annual budget to keep up with maintenance requirements – not the approach of "fix on failure". Somehow, money is found in a crisis to patch things up but not enough money is budgeted to keep things in proper repair. Unless the approach to maintaining school buildings is fundamentally changed, many respondents felt that passing the levy would only lead to a repeat of the current situation in another twenty years, or so.

Several comments cited the need for a qualified maintenance manager or supervisor. Some comments were to the effect of "I'm in favor of making repairs, but not in wasting money". The

feeling is that contractors should not be hired unless there is no alternative to using existing staff – who should be qualified for many types of maintenance work.

Taxes: Some respondents commented that they don't want to pay higher taxes to support the schools – often saying that existing funds are sufficient and just need to be spent more wisely – especially for maintenance. A few expressed concern that the elderly, poor, or those on fixed income would have difficulty paying higher taxes. About as many comments, however, said that taxes were not the reason the levy failed; instead, they wouldn't mind paying extra taxes if they could trust that additional funds would be spent for the intended purposes. Building on the fact that most respondents who voted for the levy will likely vote for any reasonable future proposal out of a sense of duty to support the schools (which was cited in numerous comments), the overall impression is that *an increase in property taxes might be supported by a majority of voters* if (1) they understand what the money would be spent for; (2) they agree with the reasons more funds are needed; (3) they know that tax increases are not excessive and are limited to a certain number of years; and, (4) there is credible assurance that additional revenue will be spent only for the intended purposes.

Financial oversight: Several respondents suggested that in order to restore confidence in financial management of the school system and ensure that funds are spent for intended purposes, it will be necessary to institute an independent audit or oversight committee to monitor and control spending during the school year. (This would be separate from the annual audit performed by the State.)

Moving 7th and 8th grades to the high school: Data in Part 1 shows that a majority of respondents oppose moving 7th and 8th grades to the high school. Numerous comments from respondents who voted both for and against the levy explain why.

There is a general desire to keep students in community-based schools through the 8th grade.

A few respondents could see the advantages of such a move because it could offer enrichment programs for middle school students, but the perceived disadvantages (i.e., longer bus rides, including mixing high school boys and middle school girls during the last leg of the morning bus ride and the first leg in the afternoon, lack of clarity on how middle school students would be segregated from high school students, combined with the isolation of the high school) were viewed as too great for parental comfort. A few respondents were not upset about the prospect of mixing 7th and 8th grade with the high school, but objected to the lack of a realistic plan.

Numerous respondents, however, expressed outrage in their opposition. The fact that 84% of survey respondents who voted against the levy also oppose moving 7th and 8th grade students to

the high school suggests that this amounts to a single issue that could ruin the chances of any future levy proposal that includes it.

Community Involvement: Many respondents complained that the levy proposal was presented to the public in October 2016, less than a month before the election. Respondents who attended multiple public meetings heard changing details and fluid plans that did not seem coherent. Some respondents felt there was no chance to make changes based on public input – that the whole exercise was a waste of time.

Common complaints were: teachers were not involved before the proposal was developed; civic groups were not enlisted to help inform and shape the project proposal; the focus was on meeting SBA deadlines, not on community involvement to develop plans voters would support; plans were scattered and disorganized; details kept changing between public meetings; plans should be stable and thought out before taking them to the public.

Critics felt that planning was rushed and incomplete despite the fact that the initial proposal was submitted to the School Building Authority in 2015. Many older respondents remember how the community was involved in planning for construction of current school facilities in the 1970s and 1980s; there was complete involvement of the community, including high school students, throughout the entire process. They do not feel the recent experience compares favorably to what they know worked in the past.

This report was prepared by Sue Groves, Michelle Jeffers, and Jay Miller working as the Building Consensus Committee. The Committee is independent of the Pocahontas County Board of Education and school administration; all expenses were borne by the Committee's members.