

## Cherry Creek 4A, 4B ask voters to save jobs, support mental health in school district

Ballot questions aim to update infrastructure, address \$60 million shortfall

by Staff

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Cutting hundreds of teachers, nurses, mental health staff, administrators and other support employees. Continued overcrowding of elementary students on the east side of the school district. The loss of a chance to bolster mental health treatment in a district that has put mental health front and center in its priorities.

Without voter approval of a tax increase and bond in the Nov. 3 election, those are among the hits Cherry Creek School District could take amid a looming **\$60 million budget shortfall partly brought on by the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic**, supporters of the measures say.

Using a bond means issuing a debt to investors that the school district eventually will pay back with interest. School districts often use bonds for projects such as construction and for building maintenance. The election also would involve a mill levy — a property tax increase. Mill levies pay for salaries, programs and items related to classroom instruction.

Ultimately, if voters approve both measures — referred to as 4A and 4B on this year's Arapahoe County ballots — the cost would add up to \$1.65 per month for each \$100,000 of a voter's home value, according to the school district. For a resident of a \$500,000 home, that totals about \$99 in a year.

Scott Siegfried, the superintendent of the school district, compared the cost to giving up one expensive coffee drink per month.

"We did a lot of polling, and we really tried to pull back the bond to (get) the most reasonable number we could," said Siegfried. He added: "That seems reasonable, given everything on the other side where we'd have to sacrifice the education of our kids."

The projected hole in Cherry Creek's budget comes as the coronavirus pandemic wreaks havoc on Colorado's economy — the crisis forced state lawmakers in the spring to consider cutting about \$3.3 billion in spending over the next year or so, leaving less money for Colorado's school districts.

The Cherry Creek district's shortfall also amassed because of "costs associated with the pandemic," a letter from Siegfried to the community said this summer.

But that wasn't the start of the district's budget woes. **Even before the pandemic**, the district was taking community recommendations for cutting costs, finding new revenue, and considering a bond and tax election for this fall, according to a district newsletter. Cherry Creek has cited underfunding by the state as a problem it already faced.

The district has already taken some action, making \$14.3 million in administrative cuts, according to Abbe Smith, district spokeswoman. Coming into this school year, staff members were handed a salary freeze along with **six unpaid days off for teachers and other staff**, Siegfried said.

### Future not certain

But a steep hill remains if Cherry Creek wants to avoid further cuts. And the community seems to be sympathetic — it appears that no organized opposition to 4A and 4B has formed during the campaign season, according to online records from the Colorado Secretary of State's Office.

No one filed comments against 4A and 4B by the constitutional deadline for Arapahoe County's information booklet on this year's ballot questions.

Siegfried says he hasn't heard pushback on the proposals.

"I've heard questions ... 'Is this the right time?'" said Siegfried, adding that district officials decided that asking voters for more money to avert laying off hundreds of teachers and other staff was worth it.

Officials project Cherry Creek's \$60 million shortfall through 2021-22, and the district hopes funding for the 2022-23 school year is at least flat if not increasing, Siegfried said.

In 2023-24, districts can likely expect more state funding, according to conversations earlier this year from the state legislature, Siegfried said. But if businesses shut down again this winter amid worsening COVID-19 trends, the outlook could be worse.

"This crystal ball is impossible to see through," Siegfried said.

Ideally, Cherry Creek hopes this year's proposed tax increase will balance its budget.

"I can't say what would happen 10 years from now," but another tax increase isn't likely in the coming years, Siegfried said. "We will keep coming back (roughly) every four-year cycle (for a) bond." That's an ask the district makes on a regular basis, he added. The state does not fund infrastructure such as buildings, so school districts need to pass bonds, Siegfried said.

Part of the money from this year's bond proposal would fund a new elementary school in the far southeast Aurora area to alleviate student overcrowding. Cherry Creek still expects a significant amount of growth in that region.

In the foreseeable future, "I don't see any new schools after this," Siegfried said. "It's kind of a strange thing to say."

### **Community input**

The recommendation to call for an election came from the district's Budget Task Force and Council of Chairs, two volunteer committees made up of parents, teachers, students, community members, administrators and district staff, according to another community letter from Siegfried said this summer.

"Those groups spent months meeting and discussing potential cuts and new sources of revenue," the letter said.

"Community members have been part of this process from the beginning," Smith said.