

School Finance Dilemma

By Dr. Howard Carlson, Superintendent

In a recent update I described Gov. Ducey's State Trust Lands plan and how it will positively impact WUSD if voter approved in May. Now I would like to shift to the dilemma WUSD faces as we move into the future.

The Governor's Plan would bring in, based upon estimated calculations, around \$183,000 per year in new revenue to WUSD, which will be primarily consumed by revenue losses due to decreased school enrollment. Beyond this challenge two key issues must be addressed to keep the district moving forward effectively.

Item #1: We must raise teacher salaries to be competitive. Over the past three years we have lost close to 25% of the high school staff each year and nearly 50% of our middle school math and science teachers. We have developed a recruitment and retention plan which provides a range of initiatives from grant forgiveness to housing, but competitive salaries remain a key factor. We have been increasing salaries over the past couple of years, but our analysis shows that to reach a competitive level with surrounding school districts (based upon this year's data) will cost the District an additional \$375,000 per year. We are starting to look at how we can resolve this issue and part of the plan will include strategic budget reductions. It is our hope to develop a proposal within the next few months to raise teacher salaries, therefore making WUSD as competitive as possible in this era of teacher shortages.

Item #2: This item is equally troubling. In 2009, WUSD received \$813,000 in capital dollars from the state to maintain & replace buses, repair roofs & a/c units, fix parking lots, replace technology...etc. In 2016, we will receive \$118,000; an 86% loss. As a result, our infrastructure has fallen into disrepair. Over half our students ride on historic or antique buses (most with no air conditioning), we have roofs which are leaking, a/c units which don't work, parking lots which are cracking and building security issues which must be addressed for the safety of our students and staff. To provide a bit of context, one bus costs \$130,000 (we operate 23 daily) and the high school gym roof (which is 17 yrs. old) will cost \$150,000 to replace. At this point the state does not have a plan to provide increased funding for these needs. Therefore, we must figure out the problem locally. We are currently working on a plan to address our most pressing health and safety needs through running a bond in November, 2016. By focusing on the basics, we could generate enough funding to cover our needs while keeping the school bond tax rate at the same level (or less) than we will pay in the coming year. More on that plan later...

As we enter the budget cycle for this coming year I will continue to provide updates. Please contact me if you have questions and thank you for your ongoing support of the Wickenburg Unified School District.