

Riverdale School District Local Option Levy 2026-27 Tax Hearing Minutes

Thursday, April 30, 2026

4:00 PM

Riverdale Grade School
11733 S Breyman Ave,
Portland, OR 97219

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Matt Donahue,
Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore,
Commissioner Tod Burton,
Commissioner Erik Kvarsten,
Executive Director Allegra Willhite,
Budget Analyst Brittanie Abayare

Absent: Commissioner Dr. Will Terry

Riverdale School District Representatives:

Shaina Weinstein, Vice Chair
Milessa Lowrie, School Board Member
Chris Russo, Superintendent
Nicole Bassen, Business Manager

Opening Remarks and Introductions

Chair Matt Donahue opened the public hearing for the Riverdale School District local option tax levy. He stated that the Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission (TSCC) is a community oversight commission established by the legislature that conducts annual budget reviews and certification processes for all member tax districts. He explained that the commission holds public hearings on property tax measures to give the public an opportunity to learn more, asking questions that a typical community member might ask.

Chair Donahue clarified that the TSCC does not take any action or advocate for a position on the proposed tax measure. TSCC staff and commissioners then introduced themselves.

Public Comment

No members of the public signed up for public comment.

Commissioner Questions and District Responses

Question 1: Asked by Chair Matt Donahue: For the first time in 10 years, Riverdale School District is asking voters to consider an increase to the local option levy. What factors influenced your decision to increase the levy from the previous one?

Answered by Nicole Bassen & Chris Russo:

- Riverdale has supported local option levies since they first became legally available. The district historically maintained the same flat levy rate across two multi-year cycles, implemented an increase, and then held it flat again for another round. When initial internal discussions began for this cycle, leadership debated whether to go out for a straight flat rate renewal or request an increase. While a flat rate was initially proposed, extensive conversations with the school board and the community, paired with an analysis of the broader school finance landscape, led to a consensus that it was time to request an increase from voters.
- While district revenues and assessed property values have grown over the past 10 years, bringing in additional overall dollars, expenditures were increasing at a much faster rate than revenue growth. Over the past decade, local option levy revenues increased roughly 10% from start to now, while operational expenditures over the same exact period surged closer to 20%. This expenditure growth was driven heavily by factors entirely outside the district's control, such as high Consumer Price Index (CPI) years, compounding PERS obligations, and escalating healthcare insurance costs.
- They emphasized that rate increases provide rare opportunities for schools to make meaningful, forward-looking investments in enhanced programming, similar to when the Student Investment Account (SIA) funds first came into effect. The district wants to utilize these resources to directly enhance programming rather than simply preserving the status quo. Consequently, the budget process was carefully designed to ensure that the core operational status quo is sustained by the baseline equivalent of the historical \$1.37 rate, while the incremental increase is deliberately carved out to represent an added value for families.

Chair Matt Donahue asked a follow-up question regarding the specific numerical differences between the historical rate and the newly proposed rate.

Answered by Nicole Bassen:

- The old rate is \$1.37; there's about a \$255,000 difference. The \$1.37 has already been programmed to support existing programs. They get creative in how they meet their needs.

Question 2: Asked by Commissioner Erik Kvarsten: What feedback have you received from the community so far about the levy?

Answered by Chris Russo:

- The district met with board members and partner organizations, and in general, the feedback has been positive. Representatives have been going "on the circuit" speaking to families, with presentations drawing 20 to 30 people at a time. The community has asked questions and provided some constructive feedback regarding clarity of messaging, but there has been no formal opposition. One community

member called and asked about the indirect cost - how much would the state get of the levy amount?

Follow-up Question: Asked by the Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore: Did you have an answer for the indirect costs?

Answered by Nicole Bassen:

- There isn't any indirect cost. They talked about the state threshold for receiving a portion of local option levy revenues [*editor note: current limits are set out in ORS 327.011*] during the budget process to ensure they double-check and do not run over state thresholds. Factoring in the exact increase amount was deliberately done to keep the district below that levy limit threshold.

Question 3: Asked by Chair Matt Donahue: How do you track the impacts of the local option levy dollars?

Answered by Chris Russo & Nicole Bassen:

- They are placing the \$255,000 in additional levy revenue into contingencies. They will have conversations on priorities. The district utilizes an existing, highly strategic tracking system to monitor progress continuously throughout the year. Maintaining this structured oversight has taken on heightened importance post-pandemic to ensure all operational actions are yielding desired results.
- Added that the administration monitors a robust grouping of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that extend far beyond regular standardized testing metrics or athletic achievements. As these KPIs relate directly to the localized investments made by the district, leadership constantly evaluates whether "the needle" is moving in the right direction. If a particular outcome does not match expectations, the administration utilizes that data to reassess where their investments are concentrated. This creates a continuous, dynamic feedback loop relying heavily on both qualitative and quantitative information.

Vice Chair Moore asked for clarification on how the levy money is budgeted as contingency.

Nicole Bassen Answered:

- Normally it's just budgeted as a regular revenue source but they only allocated the equivalent of the original \$1.37 into the current program budget and placed the remainder of the \$255,000 into contingencies. If the levy passes, they will hold conversations with the board about specific investments and then pass a budget amendment to pull the funds out of contingency.

Question 4: Asked by Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore: Can you point to specific educational outcomes that you believe are the result of the increased funding offered by the local option levies voters have passed year after year? **Follow-up:** It's a difficult time, and we understand that most focus is likely on keeping what you have. If the new levy passes, is there a chance you will be able to introduce new instructional topics, and if so what subject areas are you considering?

Answered by Nicole Bassen and Chris Russo:

- Answered the follow-up portion first, explaining that local option levy revenues are traditionally budgeted in their entirety as a general operating revenue source flowing into the general fund. However, for this specific measure, the district chose to only allocate the baseline equivalent of the historical \$1.37 rate directly into existing active programs.
- The entirety of the incremental increase was intentionally placed into a dedicated contingency account. The district did not make premature assumptions that the increase would pass, avoiding programming those funds ahead of time. If the levy passes, administration will engage in an explicit, transparent conversation with the school board regarding specific investments and subsequently execute a formal budget amendment to pull those funds out of contingency.
- Addressing the core question regarding specific outcomes, the representative clarified that because this is a general operating levy rather than a restricted grant, the dollars are blended into general operations, making it legally and functionally difficult to declare that a single dollar funded a single exact outcome. If the district did not possess these levy funds, it would be entirely unable to sustain its expanded programming. For example, while music and art are treated as optional electives and frequently eliminated in neighboring districts, Riverdale has successfully preserved robust music and art programs across its schools.
- They added that keeping the 30-cent incremental allocation separated was deemed vital for public transparency and community input. If the levy passes, it allows the board to have an intentional discussion regarding community testing priorities. If the funds are approved, specific areas targeted for expansion include taking the high school through the formal authorization process to expand the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (MYP).
- Additionally, the district is looking to expand electives overall, with world language offerings representing a major priority based on community demand. Conversely, if the levy were to fail, these expanded elective offerings and "Express range" programs would be the primary areas targeted for budget reductions.

Question 5: Asked by Commissioner Tod Burton: What are current teacher / student ratios and how do they compare to other districts?

Answered by Nicole Bassen and Chris Russo:

- Answered that like many school districts across the state post-COVID, Riverdale experienced a period of declining enrollment. This decline was felt acutely at the high school level, where students found it easier to transition to alternative options such as online schools. The district has been actively climbing out of that enrollment dip ever since.
- Because the school is small by design, this year's graduating class is exceptionally

small (29 students). To reverse this trend, the district has focused heavily on growing its freshman class, as freshman year serves as the primary entry point; it is historically much more difficult to convince families to transfer in as juniors.

- The district's long-term goal for the high school is to stabilize at roughly 60 students per class, pushing total high school enrollment above 200 to an ideal capacity of approximately 240 students. Currently, because of the enrollment decline, the high school maintains very low teacher-to-student ratios, sitting at roughly 9-to-1.
- As enrollment successfully scales up toward the 240-student target, the ratio will naturally increase. However, as class sizes grow, the district will look at strategically adding teaching staff—specifically targeting physical education (PE) and science, which are the two primary subject areas that face scheduling challenges when ensuring all students receive their required course sections. Even with increased class sizes and subsequent staff additions, the district projects the high school ratio will remain around 12-to-1, keeping it incredibly small. Down at the grade school level, the district maintains a stable student-to-teacher ratio of 14-to-1, though class sizes vary slightly by grade and are generally structured around two sections per grade level.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question regarding out-of-district students, noting that Riverdale is a highly desirable district. He inquired about the volume of interdistrict transfer students, how much tuition revenue they generate, and whether out-of-district families benefit from the levy without paying property taxes.

Answered by Nicole Bassen and Chris Russo:

- Yes, the maximum capacity of the high school building effectively caps enrollment at roughly 240. The educational models are explicitly designed around 60 students per grade (240 total), making it physically challenging to expand staff or student populations beyond those constraints

Additional Follow-up Question: Asked by Commissioner Tod Burton: How much demand do you get from out-of-district students? Do they benefit from the levy without paying for it?

Answered by Chris Russo and Nicole Bassen:

- Responded that interdistrict transfers represent a significant portion of the student body, keeping the ratio of outside to inside-district students at approximately 60/40, 55/45, or 45/55. They clarified that out-of-district families do not dilute the levy unfairly because the private tuition rate charged by the district is set significantly higher than the standard per-pupil funding allocated by the state, effectively equalizing costs. Furthermore, through the Riverdale Foundation, transfer families are asked to donate the financial equivalent of the local option levy property tax amounts, ensuring they contribute equitably to the district's operational funds.

Additional Follow-Question asked by Commissioner Kvarsten about which grade levels

see the most transfer.

Answered by Nicole Bassen and Chris Russo:

- Kinder is the biggest level of transfer, then it's mostly sixth grade and freshman year – the entry points of middle and high school.

Question 6: Asked by Commissioner Erik Kvarsten: The local option levy website states that if the levy were not the pass, the revenue loss would be the equivalent of 7 teaching positions or 21 days of instruction. Would layoffs or cutting instruction days be the only option if the levy did not pass?

Follow up: Would you need to lay off teachers, or would losses be covered under natural attrition? Do you have any vacant positions currently?

Answered by Nicole Bassen and Chris Russo:

- Answered that references to cutting 7 teaching positions or 21 days of instruction represent a broad-level way to easily quantify the severe financial magnitude of the levy funds when doing public outreach. Layoffs or cutting instructional days are definitely not where the administration would choose to start balancing the budget.
- In a failure scenario, the district would leverage any vacant staff positions through natural attrition to minimize direct impacts on personnel, followed immediately by eliminating non-essential, non-personnel spending such as travel, professional development, and consumables. However, personnel costs comprise roughly 70% to 80% of Riverdale's total budget, meaning non-personnel trimmings can only go so far.
- If the proposed measure fails, local option levy funding under the current \$1.37 rate would end at the end of the current fiscal year, meaning the district would need to figure out a bridge year of funding. They could consider going back to voters again in the fall, but the new rate wouldn't start until the following fiscal year, leaving a gap in funding. During that interim year, they would evaluate how low they could safely draw down contingency reserves without risking stability, collaborate with the Riverdale Foundation to maximize localized fundraising, and engage in deep community conversations while actively preparing to return to the ballot box for a subsequent election.

Question 7: Asked by Commissioner Tod Burton: What is your process for determining the best use of local option levy dollars?

Follow up: What do future demographics for the school look like, including population, and interdistrict transfers and/or students paying tuition? How are these trends influencing your decisions on how to spend local option dollars?

Answered by Nicole Bassen & Chris Russo:

- Answered that the process for allocating levy dollars is dictated by the district's comprehensive strategic plan. The initial version of this plan was built upon extensive

community inquiry conducted in 2025, which gathered feedback from students, teachers, and parents to establish an operational blueprint.

- When evaluating the current levy cycle, the leadership team repeated this engagement process, gathering widespread public input to ensure the budget accurately reflects community priorities. Administration compiled all feedback, drilled through the data to isolate common themes, and worked with the leadership team to weave those specific priorities into the strategic plan's core programmatic pillars: instruction, communication, and connection.
- To keep funding predictable, the school board relies on a policy of steady, multi-year tuition adjustments tracked across a three-year window. This allows administration to monitor economic conditions and adjust intake smoothly. Demographic variations directly dictate where local option dollars are deployed; for example, the district recently welcomed a large cohort of incoming students requiring intensive dyslexia support, prompting leadership to immediately expand resources and specialized staff training to address that specific educational need.
- Regarding future demographics, the representative noted that Riverdale is a strictly residential, heavily built-out district with very little room for physical expansion or new housing developments. While minor property splits occasionally occur, leading to a new home that becomes eligible for levy taxes; the tax base remains stable. The district faced higher tax compression issues roughly three years ago, but as localized housing values have steadily risen, compression has dropped, giving the district slightly more financial breathing room.

Question 8: Asked by Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore: Part of the justification for this levy is that state funds do not adequately cover the cost of education. Does Riverdale participate in lobbying at the state level to try and change school funding levels?

Answered by Nicole Bassen & Chris Russo:

- Answered that Riverdale is actively involved in state-level legislative conversations and school funding advocacy. Because Riverdale is a very small district, it possesses limited independent political leverage; consequently, the district relies heavily on partnering with larger school districts to serve as the primary, louder voice in demanding state-level funding increases. However, Riverdale representatives maintain a consistent, active presence in all of those foundational conversations.
- Added that the superintendent is highly active within the tri-county metro area superintendents group, which brings together school leadership from across Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington counties. This collective allows superintendents to tag-team state legislators utilizing a dual-perspective approach.
- Larger districts present advocacy tied heavily to high-needs data and socioeconomic status (SES) metrics. Concurrently, Riverdale is able to stand before legislators as a unique case study: a small, remarkably well-supported district whose community is

entirely willing to step up and tax themselves to the maximum limit, yet still faces structural operational deficits because the state's baseline funding model is insufficient.

Question 9: Asked by Chair Matt Donahue: What do you wish the public knew about the work made possible by this levy?

Answered by Nicole Bassen & Chris Russo:

- Answered that the district wants the public to fully recognize that without the multi-decade generosity and ongoing willingness of local voters to support these levies, Riverdale School District would simply not be where it is today. This local investment is not a luxury; it constitutes an indispensable, significant portion of the active operational budget.
- Its impact on daily student life is profound. Bassen shared a personal perspective, noting that their own children love art, and being forced to place them in an educational environment devoid of creative outlets would "literally crush their souls". The levy directly prevents that reality. While massive, large-scale school districts possess the structural cushion to absorb state funding shifts or weather macro-financial deficits, smaller educational institutions feel compounding cost increases acutely. When costs rise, a small district cannot absorb the blow across a massive base, forcing a stark choice on whether to eliminate entire specialized courses or programs. The levy is what allows Riverdale to maintain its comprehensive, high-quality programming.
- Added that for 25 years, this community investment has directly ensured that Riverdale kids are successful, well-rounded, and provided an education that is deeply valued by the community.

Additional Discussion: Historical District Context

Following the formal question-and-answer sequence, **Commissioner Tod Burton** inquired about the historical demographics and the unique operational survival of Riverdale as an independent, standalone K-12 district.

Nicole Bassen & Chris Russo provided historical context, explaining that Riverdale operated for a long period of its history strictly as a localized K-8 district. When the State of Oregon altered its school finance and education laws to mandate that public school districts must be comprehensive K-12 systems to remain independent public entities, Riverdale faced immense pressure. It stands out as one of the only K-8 districts in the entire state that successfully navigated that transition and expanded into a full K-12 district rather than being forced to dissolve or consolidate into a neighboring jurisdiction. To achieve this, the community had to engage in a lengthy legislative and development process, which included successfully lobbying the state legislature to alter the law so that Riverdale could legally pass a capital bond to construct a high school facility physically located on property outside of its primary geographic taxing boundary lines. The representative concluded by noting that the high school is incredibly proud to be celebrating its 30th anniversary this coming May, a milestone that underscores the community's profound, historical determination to sustain its independent school system.

Closing Remarks

Chair Matt Donahue thanked the Riverdale School District board members and administrative leadership for a their participation in the hearing.

There being no other business, Chair Donahue closed the meeting.