

OPINION

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Little love for levies

Voters weren't persuaded, even in places like Olmsted Falls, which had a remarkably persuasive case to make

Cuyahoga County's school-levy death toll in last Tuesday's primary was grim. Most voters just said no to new-money requests — although Parma was a welcome exception. Even renewals and replacements had a tough slog.

That was true even in those rare districts that are going the extra mile to cut costs, merge operations and find new sources of revenue, such as Olmsted Falls.

The failure of Olmsted Falls' replacement levy for school repairs was a combination of unfortunate ballot language and poor communication, school officials believe.

But it also reflects voters' allergic reaction to paying more these days, even in a district that conducts its affairs like a well-run business.

Because the ballot called the Olmsted Falls levy a request for "additional" money, residents of the school district — which covers Olmsted Falls, Olmsted Township, parts of North Olmsted, Berea and Columbia Station — apparently didn't understand that it was a replacement levy — no new taxes. The 2.8-mill continuing permanent improvement levy to maintain buildings failed 54 percent to 46 percent.

Yet this is a district that has been conscientious about stretching taxpayers' money while earning the highest possible academic rating — "excellent with distinction" — from the Ohio Department of Education.

Relying heavily on residential taxes, the Olmsted Falls schools have to stay lean. That has been a challenge as enrollment leaped 11 per-

cent in the last five years.

Yet the district managed last year to reduce average teacher salaries 2 percent and per-pupil spending by 6 percent — a feat few districts in the state can match.

Superintendent Todd Hoadley has sent staff to work with Cuyahoga Community College to apply techniques from the corporate world to increase efficiencies. The district shares a special-education administrator with the North Olmsted schools, and earns extra money providing transportation services to the Lakewood schools and transportation maintenance to the Fairview Park schools.

More school districts need to embrace such creative arrangements to cut costs — and some need to go further, with mergers or shared superintendents and other top managers.

In Olmsted Falls, such initiatives mean that voters otherwise might have faced more than just a no-extra-cost replacement levy. That fiscal pressure will increase as the state cuts its school funding disproportionately to affluent districts.

Hoadley thinks he understands some of the reasons voters nixed the levy, besides the confusion over ballot language. He wants to limit the next levy to 10 years instead of making it continuous. And he promises to be transparent and give plenty of progress reports along the way.

He's also considering a door-to-door campaign to get the word out. Telling people about the creative ways that Olmsted Falls is trying to rely on resources besides the voters' pocket-books could turn the tide as well.