

Reasons to Vote YES on Nov. 7 Winslow School Bond #8:

FEAR AND MIL RATES

The only argument against the Winslow school bond referendum I have seen is higher taxes. It's a powerful argument, because it invokes fear. It is also easy to repeat. Fear and repetition, historically, are powerful rhetorical tools for influencing human behavior. The taxes are coming! The taxes are coming!

Right now, Winslow's mil rate is \$16.74 per \$1,000 of assessed value. The only prediction on the table about the impact of the bond payoff schedule on the town tax rate is about one mil (\$1 per \$1,000 of assessed value). And yes, that payback includes the 20 years of interest that my chief referendum adversary, Mr. St. Onge, likes to roll into the bond amount to increase the fear factor.

The forces of NO want you to defeat this bond proposal because of the presence of a larger performing arts center in the construction plan. This, they say, is the difference between a "reasonable" mil rate increase and an extravagant mil rate increase. Even the forces of NO are not saying there is a zero-cost way out of this. Even they admit and seem to approve of the idea that classrooms must be added the high school and some modifications made to the elementary school in order to relocate the junior high students. And that is two thirds of the cost! The majority.

The PAC is about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the project cost. The advocates of NO argue: take out the PAC (which they oversimplify as reducing the construction cost by a full third*), put it up for a re-vote, and they will vote Yes.

Let's assume that taking the PAC out really did reduce the bond by a full third, and now you feel comfortable voting Yes when you didn't before. You have saved yourself a third of one mil. 30 cents per thousand dollars of value.

So this entire debate is about 30 cents per thousand dollars per year. If you have a \$200,000 house, that is \$66...PER YEAR. \$5.50 per month. 18 CENTS per day.

But you say you are on a fixed income, you're having trouble making ends meet, and your house has some deferred maintenance. Okay, let me guess your home is therefore assessed at \$85,000. The annual impact of the PAC part of the project on your tax bill would therefore be \$28.05 PER YEAR. \$2.34 per month. 8 CENTS per day.

Yet in the argument against an increase in taxes, the bogeyman is the mil rate. In some comment threads people have speculated that a 1 mil increase would give Winslow the highest mil rate in the area. This is incorrect. But it led me to wonder how Winslow's mil rate does compare to other communities in the Central Maine and Kennebec Valley area, and even in some other notable communities around the state. Google to the rescue - about a ½ hour later I present you with this list of current mil rates order of highest to lowest.

Mil rates: \$ per \$1000 of value:

Lewiston \$28.02
Waterville \$23.33
Auburn \$22.99
Fairfield \$22.80
Gardiner \$22.00
Portland \$21.65
Augusta \$20.38
Hallowell \$19.70
Clinton \$19.40
Skowhegan \$19.04
Smithfield \$17.00
Winslow \$16.74
Oakland \$16.40
Albion \$16.00
China \$15.90
Vassalboro \$14.55
Belgrade \$14.40
Benton \$14.40
Norridgewock \$13.45
Palermo \$13.20
Sidney \$11.70

So here is where our opinions will start to diverge. There are a lot of factors that influence a mil rate: the services a town provides (schools, police, fire, trash collection, sewer system), the population size, the wear and tear on infrastructure, property values, road maintenance and snowplowing. Look at that list above and think about what kind of community you want to live in. Are you willing to pay for such a community? Or are you willing to make the sacrifices to have the lowest mil rate?

Based on such an analysis, I am totally comfortable with Winslow's current tax rate. I am comfortable with the idea of a mil rate 1 mil higher - \$17.74 per thousand. I've heard other - non-school factors may kick the rate up even 1 more mil, bond or no bond. Okay, \$18.74. And let's toss on one more mil in case of something unforeseen. \$19.74 per thousand dollars of value moves Winslow up to Hallowell territory.

For consolidated schools with newer facilities (and even a PAC), excellent teachers, great fire, police, and public works services? Yeah, I think that's worth it, and I feel pretty comfortable calling it a civic duty for all residents to pitch in paying that. For me, everything below Oakland, I don't want to live in. I like a modicum of civilization. And civilization costs something.

Now I'm asking you to have some pride in what your community is, and what it can be, and to make an investment in it for all. Maybe even for children and grandchildren of yours that haven't even been born yet.

*Elimination of the PAC in a Plan B is unlikely to produce a pure $\frac{1}{3}$ cost savings. This is because when the new theatre is built, the old theatre is being converted into numerous classrooms, offices, and practice rooms for band and chorus. If this plan is not adopted, and the 200-seat auditorium remains in place, some provision will still have to be made to maintain current programming for the junior high students that will now be sharing the high school facilities. That would probably take the form of some additional rooms at some additional cost. I'm no expert, but I'll say your $\frac{1}{3}$ cost savings is more likely to be $\frac{1}{6}$. And that might very well evaporate due to inflation during the delay in getting this back on a ballot for a re-vote.

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Opinion by Tom McCowan

Who is this guy?

- Winslow homeowner since 2001; selected Winslow because of excellent schools
- Real estate lawyer in Waterville
- Father of one WHS graduate and one senior; husband of WHS teacher