

The DAILY LEADER

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STATE NEWS

Illinois state senator revamping school funding overhaul

SPRINGFIELD (AP) — The Democrat sponsoring a contentious plan to overhaul the state's nearly 20-year-old school funding formula said he's altering the bill to help remove partisan and regional opposition for ease of passage.

State Sen. Andy Manar of Bunker Hill proposed a measure last year to make school funding more equitable by directing more state money to poorer districts at the expense of wealthier ones. It passed the Senate but stalled in the House.

So, this session, he's making one major change that aims to even out inequities: a new provision accounting for regional cost differences, such as higher teacher salaries in districts where the cost of living is higher. High-poverty districts in the Chicago area still would get a boost in their funding allotment, but poor districts in central and southern Illinois would now see smaller gains under the changes.

Specific funding details have not yet been calculated by the State Board of Education, which has done previous analyses.

Manar, who shared a draft of the legislation with The Associated Press, said he plans to file the changes in the coming days. Last session's failed legislation, which Republicans said unfairly created a system of "winners and losers," was fre-

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Livingston County Sheriff Tony Childress was the guest speaker at the first Issues and Eggs gathering for 2015. The event is sponsored by the Pontiac Area Chamber of Commerce and was held at Edinger's Filling Station on Wednesday. LUKE SMUCKER/DAILY LEADER

ISSUES AND EGGS

Sheriff thankful for his opportunity to serve

By Luke Smucker
Staff Reporter

"I'm thankful." That is the phrase Livingston County Sheriff Tony Childress used multiple times during his introduction at the Pontiac Area Chamber of Commerce's Issues and Eggs event held at Edinger's Filling Station on Wednesday.

As the crowd of 47 — the largest since Rich Burbridge took over as CEO and president of the Chamber in 2013 — finished a buffet

breakfast of orange juice, coffee, bacon, eggs, biscuits and gravy, hash browns and cinnamon rolls, Childress began his discussion on the state of the Livingston County Sheriff's Office and his plans for 2015.

The thanks the Sheriff gave, both to the department and the people of Livingston County, set the tone for a discussion on how peace officers can benefit the community and how that community can benefit its sheriff's department.

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HOUSING

LCHA blunt regarding project

By Paul Westermeyer
Staff Reporter

It was a session of clarity and communication at the Livingston County Housing Authority Wednesday afternoon, as the housing authority board fielded questions and comments from concerned residents about the planned housing project on Water Street in a three-hour meeting.

The board and its independent associates acknowledged that the plan was going forward, but would continue a dialogue with the community and help address concerns.

Dale Schrock, the chairman of the Board of the Housing Authority, began the meeting by thanking the residents for their presence and a brief update on the progress of the development, before opening the floor to public comment.

Most pertinent among his statements was the fact that the Housing Authority's project was a done deal.

"I want to be very upfront and clear here," Schrock said. "A lot of energy and effort has been put out, we've spent a lot of money and it's going forward. That's not going to change."

"We've gone too far down the road and we can't go backwards. We believe it's going to be an excellent property, and a beautiful property ... we've committed too many resources (to go back)."

The residents who showed up at the board meeting were more resigned to the project's inevitability than those who met at a gathering last Thursday night at the Pontiac City Council chambers. Nevertheless, they reiterated a number of their concerns from the previous meeting in hopes of having the board and its affiliates move forward with said concerns in mind.

Once the public had all its comments, questions and criticisms voiced, the Housing Authority's attorney Eric Hanson and Schrock addressed each and every point in turn:

- On the potential conflict of interest in the Housing Authority and the Livingston Property Development, a group which shares the

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LIVINGSTON COUNTY

Taxing bodies formally agree to tax abatement program



Those gathered to sign the abatement were GLCEDC Chairman Mike McCoy, Livingston County Board Chairman Marty Fannin, Fairbury Mayor Lynn Dameron, Chenoa Mayor Don Corrie, Pontiac Mayor Bob Russell, Odell Village President Terry Joyner, Prairie Central CUSD 8 Board President Patricia Haberkorn, Prairie Central CUSD 8 Superintendent Dr. John Capasso, Pontiac District 90 Superintendent Jon Kilgore, Pontiac District 429 co-Superintendent Jim Davis and Odell District 435 Superintendent Mark Hettmansberger. PHOTO PROVIDED

By Cynthia Grau
Staff Reporter

One of the largest tax abatements in the Livingston County area was signed by nine taxing bodies recently with the goal to bring new businesses and new jobs to the area.

The Greater Livingston County Economic Development Council has been working on this 10-year abatement package for the past six months, and had nine taxing bodies sign the agreement officially on Jan. 14. Those taxing bodies are the city and village governing bodies from Chenoa, Fairbury, Pontiac and Odell, as well as Livingston County and area school districts from Pontiac, Prairie Central and Odell.

Adam Dontz, CEO of GLCEDC, said this initiative has broad-based geographic support throughout the county and Chenoa. He said the attention was focused on the communities in the Interstate 55 and U.S.

Route 24 corridors with thoughts of transportation and other infrastructure development, primarily water and sewer capabilities.

Dontz said the GLCEDC is looking to expand to the U.S. Route 47 corridor around Forrest and Saunemin and move along Illinois 116 toward the Flanagan and Graymont area in the future.

"This property tax abatement program — with its scaled, 10-year term — is the most robust and competitive pre-negotiated property tax abatement in the Interstate 55 corridor. From a property tax perspective, we can now more effectively compete with any area in the region," Dontz said.

Dontz also said he doesn't know of any other economic development agency that has worked with schools, municipalities and the county to come up with a pre-negotiated property tax abatement that extends to a

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ISSUES

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"They say you're only as good as the people you have working for you and the people you surround yourself with," Childress said. "I am so thankful to have a county board that diligently works with me and does what they can to make things flow smoothly at the Sheriff's Department. I hope we can always keep that mentality."

Childress touched on some highlights from the past year. He emphasized his gratitude for being named sheriff after being part of the department since 1991.

He talked about the department's recent addition of Animal Control and all the positive comments he's heard since the department began overseeing things. Childress also spoke about his excitement toward the funding the department received for a new Computer Aided Dispatch software system and new radio system.

"The minute that you think you know it all, it's time for you to cash it in," Childress said, referencing his recent title change within the department. "I sincerely feel and believe I'll be learning from now on and as long as I'm there. That's the attitude I live with and the rules I try to live by; there is always something to learn."

Childress transitioned from the brief overview of the previous year to what the county can expect for 2015. He spoke of the updates to the department's vehicle fleet. In addition to the marked cars many are used to seeing across the county, the department has also purchased some unmarked vehicles.

Childress also mentioned the department is hoping to outfit each vehicle with a computer. Childress said Livingston County is one of the only counties where all but one vehicle in the fleet are without computer access.

"We are looking forward to seeing that pan out this year and hopefully we plan to have computers in-

stalled in the new fleet while we continue to replenish it," Childress said. Switching to personnel, Childress said the department recently received a K-9 unit, marking the first time a K-9 has been part of the Sheriff's Department since the 1970s. The department's K-9 handler and officer will begin training next week in Indiana.

"We are looking for some great things from that team," Childress said. "When I think about it, I remember hearing about Sheriff Fry, back in the '70s having a dog. I remember seeing pictures of that dog, but I would say with taking over animal control and now having a K-9 Unit — we're going to the dogs."

Focusing on the community, Childress said the department is currently looking to the lost alert program. The Sheriff summarized the program as a notification system that Grundy and other counties use for instances where someone becomes lost.

Childress said in those instances time is of the essence and things tend to occur right before sundown.

"When that happens, we don't have time on our side," Childress said. "We need to use all of the technology and tools that we can implement to quickly try and bring these situations to a positive disposition."

In addition, to adding new programs, Childress also hopes to re-work some programs already in place. In particular, he wants to increase the department's level of awareness by having feeds from cameras already placed within county schools available to the officers as well.

To further implement this measure, Childress will be making appointments with district superintendents to discuss the

matter. The department is also looking into grants that can be used to fund the program.

"I have very strong feelings about making absolutely certain that every school in this county has cameras in it that are interlinked to our 9-1-1 communication center," Childress said. "If we can't get the grants, my question will be simple: what is a child's life worth? We find ways to do everything else we need to do, so hopefully we'll find a way to do this as well."

"I want to make sure that when that 9-1-1 call comes in and there is a critical incident going on at one of your schools, that I have eyes on it right then and there."

"The live feeds would be a reflection of what is going for dispatchers," Childress added. "With the knowledge these feeds

provide, the department can inform cars en route if any perpetrators, suspects or crime is occurring. The officers can be cognizant of that knowledge immediately and possibly save a child's life while at the same time saving themselves from running into an ambush."

Childress closed his discussion by re-assuring those in attendance that he hoped the measures would never be needed, however he felt better knowing the access was there, in case of an emergency.

"We need to plan for that unfortunate instance or circumstance, so that we are prepared and able to respond," Childress said. "Somebody once told me, the meaning of responsibility is the ability to respond. That's what I want to make certain we have."

ABATEMENT

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10-year term.

"Business leaders and investors can quickly and easily measure the economic benefits of the property tax abatement program," Dontz said. "The program is straightforward, and provides clear direction on how to meet the construction, employment, and wage requirement criteria in order to qualify for the property tax abatement."

The criteria of the abatement include businesses having to build something new to qualify. Existing businesses have to add new construction or new businesses can build all new infrastructure. Dontz said the standard is lower for an existing business adding on than a new business coming in because the GLCEDC wanted to reward and provide incentives to the local businesses for the investment they've made to the community.

Dontz said there are four different abatements available: three-year, five-year, seven-year and 10-year. As an example, the terms are split into three groups. For a 10-year abatement, the first group has to be a new construction of 25,000 square foot minimum or a building expansion of 12,500 square foot minimum.

The business needs to meet two of the three terms in group two, which is a new capital investment of \$1.5 million minimum, new employment creation of 40 full-time employees or employment retention and expansion of 80 full-time employees at a minimum.

The third thing, which is required for any length abatement, is wage and benefits requirements. The abatement requires wages equal or greater to 125 percent of the Livingston County per capita income level according to the American Community Census Survey Five-Year Estimates, which is presently \$29,201.

Dontz said the focus of the abatement is threefold. First, they wanted new capital investments and new buildings in the county. Second, they want to create new employment and retain existing employ-

ers. Third, they want to try to raise the bar on the wage standard in the county.

"When businesses invest in our community everyone wins," Dontz said. "New building investment increases our tax base and helps to keep the property tax rate low; for residents and business alike."

The way the abatement works, Dontz said, is new buildings or building expansions would not pay new property taxes throughout the terms of the abatement. For example, a 10-year abatement would be tax-free for five years, would pay 75 percent for years six and seven, and 50 percent for years eight, nine and 10.

Dontz explained existing taxes would not change on existing buildings, so businesses that choose to build expansions will continue to pay on the existing buildings.

Businesses are also expected to remain open and operating for at least two years past the end of the abatement, and the GLCEDC will monitor wages, benefits and full-time employee numbers from each business on a regular basis to make sure each business follows all terms of the abatement.

Dontz said the feedback for the abatement has been positive, as all but one of the nine entities passed this measure unanimously. The GLCEDC is looking for results as quickly as a year or a year and a half, but Dontz said it could happen sooner.

He also said people shouldn't be discouraged if it takes a little longer than that. He is also spreading the word about this abatement by attending trade shows throughout the year to market and advertise the abatement to bring in new investments to the area.

"I anticipate the property tax abatement will give existing business the incentive they need to tip the scale in the direction of expansion and to attract new growth that might otherwise have gone just north or south of us on Interstate 55," Dontz said. "I'm optimistic we could see the benefits of the program within 12 to 18 months or less. A multifaceted marketing campaign will be launched to inform business owners and investors of the program's benefits."