

# THE OREGONIAN

## CHILDREN'S LEVY FACING TOUGH CHOICES

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**Illustration:** Graphics -- Sidebar/PUBLIC MEETING

What: Allocation committee, *Portland Children's Investment Fund*

When: Today, noon to 2 p.m.

Where: *Portland* Building, 1120 S.W. Fourth Ave., meeting room C, 2nd floor

How: Public comment will be taken at the beginning of the meeting.

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Summary: The oversight committee must set priorities and sort through concerns raised by social service providers

The *Portland* children's levy scrambles into its first year facing a cacophony of concerns and skepticism from social service providers about how its millions in taxpayer dollars will be spent.

Competing voices -- from the tiniest nonprofits to larger programs such as Head Start -- leave the levy's oversight committee with a balancing act in the months ahead.

Questions include whether to invest heavily in a handful of programs or lightly in many; how to define a "proven" program and how fast to start distributing the money.

Other questions: Should the cash go to the neediest children or to programs that touch the most kids? Should an edge be given to tried-and-true approaches or to promising new ideas? How should requests for money to cover cutbacks that took effect July 1 be handled?

Voter initiatives for children in Seattle and San Francisco faced many of these questions during the last decade. Supporters of the *Portland* levy urge skeptics to be patient in the first year.

"There are a lot of doubts on the table," said David Sawyer, executive director of the philanthropic organization Social Venture Partners, to loud murmurs of assent at a recent gathering of 150-plus adults who work with children. "Call me naive, but I refuse to believe citizens like us . . . can't spend this money well."

With at least \$8 million to distribute in the first year of a five-year levy, the five-person allocation committee has set a target of Oct. 1 to begin investing money.

That first round will go toward early childhood programs covering prenatal to school-age children. Money for child abuse prevention and intervention programs would follow by winter, and after-school and mentoring programs by the spring.

#### Hurdles cleared

City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, one of the committee members, said he would have preferred to get moving faster. After city voters approved the levy in November, *Portland* and Multnomah County quibbled over the setup and operations of the oversight committee. Debate then followed over whether to set targets for each of the three spending categories. Then, city and county politicians spent months trying to come up with a bailout for schools.

With all those hurdles cleared, Saltzman said what's important now is to take the time to get things right with the children's levy.

"I anticipate we're not going to get it perfect the first time," Saltzman said. "We're trying to do a lot in a relatively compressed period of time."

Backers of the levy want to establish a track record that persuades *Portland* voters to renew the measure in 2007.

"Every property taxpayer is like an investor," levy director Andy Olshin said. "Four years from now, we're going to look to folks to make a reinvestment like San Francisco and Seattle have done."

The *Portland* levy works out to about 40 cents per \$1,000 of a property's assessed value, or about \$60 a year for the owner of a property assessed at \$150,000.

Supporters aimed to generate \$10 million a year, money that also could attract matching money from foundations and other donors. But the combination of Measure 5 property tax limits and lower-than-expected growth in property values will put first-year spending closer to \$8 million.

Whatever the number, officials in San Francisco and Seattle say one of the first things to realize is that the money will never be enough to satisfy all of the community's needs.

"There will always be frustrations and criticisms," said Margaret Brodtkin, executive director of a child activist nonprofit in San Francisco that pushed that city's children's initiative on the ballot in 1991. "The things they're struggling with are pretty inevitable and typical."

#### Frustrations surface

Frustrations and criticisms surfaced at last week's community gathering in *Portland* where ideas flew without much time for discussion. The allocation committee meets today to discuss how it will evaluate proposals and may hear many of the concerns during its public-comment period.

Among the concerns: the need for more urgency, fears that politics will trump fairness, how struggling nonprofits can find money to prove their programs work, whether programs helping disabled people or minorities will get a fair shake.

"It's absolutely necessary the public keeps an eye on it," said former state Rep. JoAnn Bowman, vice chairwoman of the African American Chamber of Commerce.

Rebecca Salinas, coordinator since 1991 of the Seattle families and education levy, said Seattle learned the need to set aside money -- \$100,000 -- for evaluation. The *Portland* levy limits administration costs such as evaluation to 5 percent, which would translate to \$500,000 of the annual \$10 million target. The committee hopes *Portland* State University can help with evaluation.

Salinas recommended focusing money rather than distributing it widely in smaller amounts. Brodtkin said San Francisco also learned the need to target money where it can produce the most benefit.

"We learned that \$10 million a year sounds like a lot, but you need focus," Salinas said. "Otherwise, there's a tendency to do a little bit of money spread broadly. That did good things, but it doesn't make systemic changes."

Olshin, the program director, is confident the levy will prove worthy of renewal. Saltzman said the committee wants to satisfy concerns expressed by providers of early childhood, child abuse and school-based programs.

But Saltzman also said voters must ultimately judge whether the taxpayer money got results.

"The more important audience, if I had to pick between providers and voters," Saltzman said, "is the voters."

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