

Children's levy gets it right

The five-member allocation committee must cast a cold eye on administrative expenses for children's programs

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Dollar signs that danced in the eyes of Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman when he kicked off the children's levy campaign last year are now firming up into real cash for real kids.

And we have to admit it: After years of wincing at that hollow refrain, "Children are our future," it was exhilarating to watch a five-member Allocation Committee prove that, in Portland at least, children are also our present.

In a recent seven-hour marathon meeting, the committee pored over children's programs, ranked by a weighted formula, to determine which should get money raised by the children's levy. Detailed contract negotiations will follow, with children's levy administrator Andy Olshin authorized to dicker, veto questionable line items and shrink allocations as needed.

The Allocation Committee must be exacting, cranky, downright stingy to keep faith with city voters, who were trusting, caring and amazingly generous last fall. The levy they approved raises up to \$50 million over five years to replicate proven after-school, child abuse-prevention and early-childhood education programs. Tentative allocations so far provide \$4.1 million for 23 early-childhood programs.

The recent meeting made it clear that an impressive amount of work has already been accomplished in a very short time. It was also clear that the

five-member Allocation Committee intends to be very firm about which expenditures will pass muster under this program, and which won't. Excellent.

Here's an easy test: This committee should approve only expenditures it could proudly and loudly boast about to voters in a campaign spot for renewal of the levy. If the expenditure raises even a faint doubt or flicker of a question mark, the committee must summon the guts to say no.

Even administrative expenses that may be justifiable should not be borne by the taxpayers under this program. Voters expect to fund direct services to children, not travel to conferences, executive directors' salaries or other overhead.

Members are scheduled to meet today, and they need to be firm in setting a stringent cap on allowable administrative expenses for grants. They also need to push for uniformity in grant applications, to better use a bottom-line service-per-child cost for each program.

If this committee does its job right, it will not only reassure taxpayers about the Children's Investment Program, but it will also set a new standard for evaluation and performance of children's programs in general.

It's exhilarating to award real cash to help real kids. But those who best serve the Allocation Committee — and Portland voters — will match warm hearts with cool accountability.