

Unification could mean tax boost for 15 districts

by **Betty Reid** - Sept. 28, 2008 07:17 PM
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Property owners in 15 of 34 Valley school districts would pay higher property tax rates if voters approve plans to unify elementary and high school districts.

For the first time in Arizona's history, voters will be considering proposals to merge districts around the state. The proposals on the Nov. 4 ballot would unify 76 elementary and high school districts into 27 K-12 districts, including combining 34 districts into six K-12 districts for Maricopa County. Other counties include Cochise, La Paz, Mohave, Pima, Pinal, Santa Cruz, Yavapai and Yuma.

The projected [tax rate](#) increases are spelled out in pamphlets being mailed this week to registered voters and also are posted on the Maricopa County Superintendent of Schools' Web site.

Tom Sounart chairman of Preserve Kyrene, said people are under the wrong impression that unification will save money. He said they are shocked when they learn about the tax rate increases and the other costs the districts will incur.

The Arizona School District Redistricting Commission, created by the state Legislature, developed the unification plans after nearly three years of discussions. School boards around the Valley strongly opposed unification.

Proponents say unification would improve Arizona education by saving administrative costs and putting more dollars into classrooms. Opponents say the proposal is vague, lacks funding and its cost and legal impact has not been thoroughly analyzed.

Jay Kaprosy, chair of Maricopa County United for Student Success, said that unification would benefit students.

"The focus should be on what is best for students, and what is best for students is a truly K-12 curriculum taught by a high quality teacher," said Kaprosy. "By eliminating administrative duplication and inefficiencies more money can be directed to teacher salaries and classroom spending."

Lyle Friesen, an Arizona [Department of Education](#) adviser for school finance, prepared the tax estimates at the request of the commission. In all six plans for Maricopa County, some elementary districts are projected to have tax rate increases while others would have decreases. Districts have different property tax rates for funding, so when areas are combined, a single, new rate has to be calculated to include the entire area.

Arizona School Board Association officials say Friesen's tax rate projections are on the low side and the formula used is flawed.

The redistricting proposal asks voters for a "leap-before-you-look . . . just-trust-us" decision," said Chris Thomas, director of legal services with ASBA and Madison School District board president.

"If the commission had completed all of its homework, we wouldn't have tax figures that don't add up," Thomas said. "We would fully understand all of the costs associated with unification and the potential impact on the education of our students."

Commission Chairman Marty Shultz cautioned that the property tax rate projections in the pamphlets are not exact tax rates but by law had to be included.

"What they are, are the assumptions developed so people can get an idea, or to get a sense," Shultz said.

He said the new five-member governing school boards for the new unified districts would set new budgets, and that's what the actual tax rates would be based on.

"We've been fighting unification because we believe our costs will increase; then we have to find funds somewhere," said Robin Krevitsky-Ferguson, Creighton School District governing board president. "If the state or the measure does not give us the money, then it comes out of the classroom."

Creighton Elementary School District, which would merge with 12 other elementary districts and Phoenix Union, is projected to have a tax increase of 53 cents per \$100 assessed valuation, or \$106 a year more for a \$200,000 home.

In the northwest Valley, voters will be asked to considering combining Glendale Union High School District with Glendale and Washington elementary districts.

The estimated tax rate will increase property tax rates for Washington district residents. On a home with a \$200,000 assessed valuation, the tax would increase \$20.

Bev Kraft, Washington Elementary School District governing board president, said it's hard to gauge whether voters will approve unification given this is an presidential election year.

"I do know that people vote with their pocketbook," Kraft said. "I live in an older area. They are not going to vote for anything that they think will increase their taxes."

