

Few Colorado superintendents could have been happier this week than Mapleton's Charlotte Ciancio, who learned Tuesday night that sometimes three strikes don't mean you're out. This election marked the Mapleton school district's fourth consecutive attempt to win voter approval of a bond issue to build and repair schools. Each year, the yes-no vote tally got a little better – from a 44%-56% loss in 2007 to this week's 58%-42% win. "If you look at where we started, we were building every year," Ciancio said Thursday. "It's taken us four years to build the momentum in the district."

Despite the lingering recession and a strong case of mid-term election malaise, Colorado voters this Election Day said no to three "tax relief" ballot measures that educators feared would devastate their schools and yes to six of 11 school district bond issues.

They also approved 16 of the 22 tax increases proposed by districts to bolster operating budgets hit by cuts in state education funding.

Jerry Wilson, superintendent of the Poudre School District that includes Fort Collins, said district and community leaders "wrestled" with whether to seek a \$120 million bond issue and a \$16 million operating increase, given the dismal economy.

They went ahead – "We wanted to give voters an opportunity to make their own decisions" – and voters responded by agreeing to both.

"I want to say ... how much we appreciate the community's support," Wilson said. "Our students are going to be the beneficiaries for years to come."

'Aversion to tax increases'

Voter approval did not extend to the state's largest bond proposal, a \$125 million bond issue in the growing Falcon School District in northeastern El Paso County.

Bond issues in two adjacent districts – Peyton and Elbert – also failed.

Falcon spokeswoman Stephanie Meredith said the bond dollars would have helped relieve overcrowding in a district operating at 103% capacity. "This bond was part of our strategic long-term plan to make sure our district was prepared for the growth projected for our area," Meredith said. "It narrowly failed so it's extremely disappointing for the district. It presents us with some very serious challenges."

The district has struggled in recent years, with three superintendents in as many years and a recall effort against two school board members.

Falcon also abuts Colorado Springs, which won national attention this year when city officials put a police helicopter for sale on the Internet and turned out streetlights, among other budget measures, after voters rejected a property tax hike last November.

Meredith said some are questioning whether Falcon's loss is due to "an aversion to tax increases of any kind."

El Paso County voters did not differ from the rest of the state, however, in soundly rejecting ballot measures 60, 61 and 101 – touted by supporters as "tax relief." The measures would have severely limited government borrowing and debt, including the state's interest-free loan program to districts.

Three districts put tax increases on the ballot that would have gone into effect only if Amendment 61 passed. Voters in two of those districts, Summit and Estes Park, said yes; East Grand voters said no.

Those results are moot given the final vote tallies on what opponents dubbed "the Bad Three." All lost by margins of at least 2-to-1.

Restoring district budget cuts

All three Colorado school districts seeking double-digit operating increases were successful, including the Boulder Valley School District at \$22.5 million, Fort Collins' \$16 million and Littleton Public Schools' request for \$12 million.

In Boulder and Fort Collins, the sales pitches emphasized, in varying degrees, plans to restore budget cuts due to declining state revenue.

Boulder leaders wrote it into their ballot language, listing "restoring critical budget cuts" and "mitigating future budget cuts" as their top items. The district also will fulfill its agreement with teachers, who would not have received raises next year without the tax increase.

In Littleton, leaders made it clear that the new dollars could not make up the deficit. The district, which also is dealing with declining enrollment, has closed two schools, cut 200 jobs and required staff to take furlough days.

"This election was all about stabilizing and maintaining what we have right now," said district spokeswoman Diane Leiker. "The cuts that have happened in the past are not likely to be restored."

School districts going to the ballot in 2010 defied economic uncertainty and tradition – research by the Colorado Association of School Executives has shown school tax measures do better with the larger turnouts in presidential elections.

In 2008, districts set a record by asking for a total of \$2.6 billion in bond issues. Then in 2009, as the fiscal picture darkened, only five districts sought bond issues and just three asked for tax increases for operating dollars.

'Investing in what works'

Some districts also had special circumstances this year.

Fort Collins was able to pass a \$120 million bond issue for repairs and technology even as school board members mull school closures.

Wilson believes that may be one reason voter approval of the bond – at 51%-49% – was less than the 56%-44% approval of the operating increase. Bonds historically perform better at the polls.

Still, both were successful.

"A lot of it has to do with a very supportive community who highly values a quality education," he said.

In Mapleton, district leaders have benefited from a recent surfeit of good news, from the release of a book about their reform efforts to media reports on their rising state test scores.

Next week, the district will be featured on the Evening News with Katie Couric.

Ciancio also believes voters were loathe to pass up the chance of a matching \$32 million state grant.

"People want to know they're investing in something that works," she said. "I think those elements definitely helped our community understand this was the best bang for the dollar."



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Election 2010: Results for school district tax questions

Bond issues* – Pass

- Poudre – \$120 million
- Mapleton – \$32 million

- Salida – \$18 million
- Akron – \$8 million
- Center – \$4.7 million
- Holly – \$3.4 million

Bond issues – Fail

- Falcon – \$125 million
- Florence – \$5.4 million
- Elbert – \$3.5 million
- Peyton – \$2.6 million, \$750,000 (separate requests)

Operating increases – Pass

- Boulder – \$22.5 million
- Poudre – \$16 million
- Littleton – \$12 million
- Durango – \$3.2 million
- Summit – \$2.15 million
- Aspen – \$1.3 million
- Clear Creek – \$775,000
- Holyoke – \$400,000
- Moffat – \$350,000
- Sierr Grande – \$350,000
- South Routt – \$349,314
- Hayden – \$321,473
- Branson – \$205,000
- Pritchett – \$100,000
- Woodlin Pass – \$75,000
- Kit Carson – \$45,000

Operating increase – Fail

- Brighton – \$3.2 million
- Burlington – \$600,000
- Cripple Creek – \$574,000
- DeBeque – \$485,277
- West Grand – \$420,000
- Agate – \$90,470

Operating increases for Amendment 61**

- East Grand – \$4 million – Fail
- Summit – \$3.5 million – Pass
- Estes Park – \$2.5 million – Pass

*All bond issues with the exception of Falcon, Poudre and Peyton’s \$750,000 request qualified for state matching grants through the BEST program. Akron was an alternate and qualifies because other districts failed to pass their requests.

**Amendment 61’s failure means these increases are invalid.