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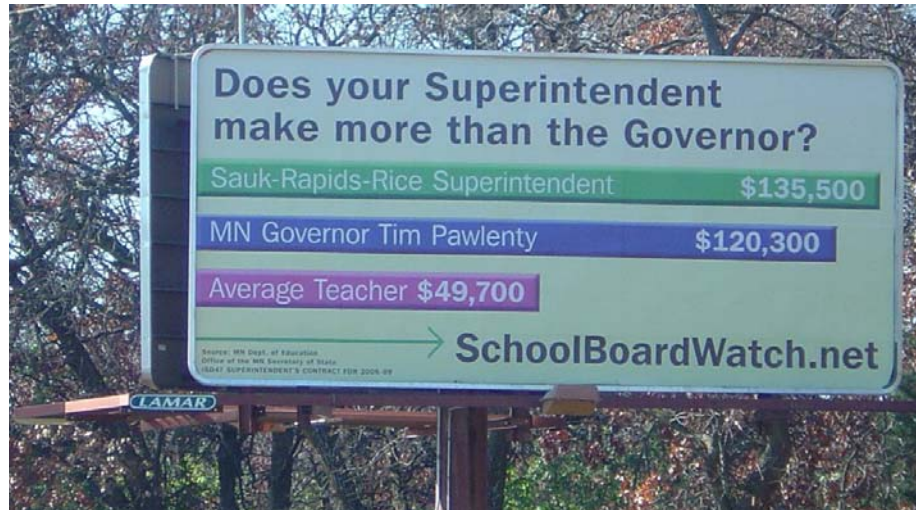
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A new tool in levy lobbying

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SAUK RAPIDS — Community members in the Sauk Rapids-Rice school district are using Internet technology to share messages as they prepare for a vote that would raise property taxes in the district. Among the tools is an anonymously operated Web site called School Board Watch, which is critical of Sauk Rapids-Rice Superintendent Greg Vandal, school board members and the overall performance of the district.

An unrelated Web site called "SRR Future" is more neutral and allows people interested in discussing the district and the tax increase campaign efforts to comment or post information. Web sites are not new to political activity, but they have not been prominent in St. Cloud-area races, said a St. Cloud State University economics professor who has made comments on his Web site for five years.

"The blogs, wikis, all this online stuff is basically an attempt at citizen journalism. It is an attempt to get other voices to get out and speak to issues," said King Banaian, who writes on scsuscholars.com. The School Board Watch site is touted on a billboard on east U.S. Highway 10 about three-tenths of a mile east of Benton County Road 79.

That billboard asks "Does your superintendent make more than the governor?" It correctly lists Vandal's \$135,500 salary and that of Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who is paid \$120,303. The Sauk Rapids-Rice district is asking voters to approve on Nov. 6 a property tax increase of \$2.8 million a year for 10 years. The money would be used to maintain current levels of services and potentially restore programs and positions lost in budget reductions in 2007-08. Sauk Rapids-Rice is joined by St. Cloud, Rocori, Albany, Sauk Centre, Big Lake, Upsala and Pierz in going to the voters this fall.

2 Web sites

No one has stepped forward to claim credit for School Board Watch. Michael Quesnell, an educator who lives in Sauk Rapids and has three children in the schools, says he started the SRR Future site.

"The goal is to get people who are interested in what happens in public education to collaborate in open space," said Quesnell, who formerly led St. Cloud school district's Safe Schools/Healthy Students program.

Quesnell's Web site posts information about the tax increase campaign. Vandal said he was not aware it existed. Vandal, who is in his 12th year in the district, is well aware of School Board Watch. The billboard and some posts on the Web site take dead aim at his and the school board's performance, claiming that student achievement should be higher, that class sizes should not be as high as the district says they are and taking issue with Vandal's salary. The Web site provides links to St. Cloud Times: Document Display Minnesota Department of Education, the Sauk Rapids-Rice school district and newspaper and government Web sites.

At least one item is incorrect on the site. It says Vandal would be entitled to 12 months severance pay when he leaves the district. In fact, a review of his contract shows he would be limited to six months, the most allowed by state law.

The School Board Watch Web site has not rattled the group of volunteers who are leading the campaign to approve the tax increase. Mark Hauck, a Department of Natural Resources employee who has three children in Sauk Rapids-Rice schools, is leading the group of volunteers.

"We are really not paying attention to it. I don't see it as being central to the issue that this referendum is revolving around, which is to bring educational resources to the teachers and the classrooms. I see this as a distraction," Hauck said.

Impact unknown

The two Web sites are a sign that technology as a campaign tool has moved local school races in this region, Vandal said.

Web sites have increasingly become part of political discourse in the country. Some people create blogs just to comment on specific races or issues. Banaian isn't sure how great of reach these two sites that focus on Sauk Rapids-Rice will have.

"These blogs give people who maybe only talk to 20 of their close personal friends a chance to find another 50 online. I don't know how big of reach it gets," he said. "Most of the blogs out there probably don't get 200 readers a day."

Barclay Carrier, who is leading an effort to pass two ballot questions in St. Cloud, said he has not seen a similar Web sites in connection with the St. Cloud campaign. His group decided there were better ways to connect with potential voters than the Internet."

"We didn't feel as though that is an integral means for us to get the message out. The voters we are focusing on, we didn't feel it was the best way to reach them."

Anonymous, Vandal said it is difficult to answer questions or concerns because the people behind the School Board Watch Web site have chosen not to identify themselves. He said he would invite public discourse, but it should take place in the light of day.

"What perhaps is different about this very public message done in a very private, anonymous way, one is left with very little to respond to. You don't know to whom you should respond," Vandal said.

Quesnell said he started his Web site to give people a chance to start talking about the issues. He was not aware of the School Board Watch site. Computers allow people the chance to participate in a public forum on their schedule without having to attend a meeting, he said. "Let's be very public about what some of the issues are," Quesnell said. "In our school district, it is a little difficult to get information because they don't post it on the (district's) Web site." Quesnell, who said he is undecided about how he will vote and is waiting for the district to make a connection between the money and improved student achievement, said the site is not anti-levy, but it is pro-democracy. "People that get involved in the process can't complain about the outcome," Quesnell said.

Log On

Here are the addresses for some Web sites with information about the Sauk Rapids-Rice proposal to raise property taxes to collect \$2.8 million a year for 10 years.

SRR Future, <http://srrfuture.pbwiki.com>.

School Board Watch, <http://www.schoolboardwatch.net>.

Sauk Rapids-Rice school district, <http://www.isd47.org>.

Minnesota Department of Education, www.education.state.mn.us/mde/index.html.