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Renewing One Mill would prevent COVID-related cuts

By Mark McGriff Opinion contributor

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First, the bad news: Our local schools are facing an epic crisis.

Now the good news: We can help, and we can do it without increasing our school taxes.

During the Great Recession, Alachua County schools had to cut back on art and music programs and media specialists. Other vital people and programs, including guidance counselors, school nurses, career-tech/academic magnet programs and classroom technology, were also at risk.

They were saved thanks to this community's support of the One Mill for Schools. In 2008, local voters approved a property tax increase of less than \$7 a month for the average homeowner. They've since voted to renew the One Mill not once, but twice, which has kept those programs alive and strong.

Because of COVID-19, local schools are facing a budget crisis even worse than the Great Recession. This year's loss could be as much as \$16 million.

What's worse, the cuts will be happening at a time when schools and the children they serve need more resources, not fewer. The last thing our students and families should have to worry about right now is potential cuts to school counselors or nurses, who are helping ensure both the emotional and physical safety of our children.

The pandemic has also magnified the digital divide. To support families without computers, Internet access or both, the district has already distributed nearly 7,000 laptops and 1,000 hot spots. The money to pay for those devices came from the One Mill, which has been the district's primary source of technology funding for years. It's certain that our students will need devices and internet access even after the pandemic is over.

We can't rely on the federal government to fix this. The COVID funding that Alachua County Public Schools got back in the spring wasn't anywhere near enough to cover PPE, staff training and other COVID-related expenses, and it doesn't look like there's any more coming, at least not any time soon.

If we want to save our local schools now and over the next four years, we'll have to do it ourselves. Fortunately, supporting the One Mill for Schools won't cost us any more money because we're just renewing what's been in place since 2008.

And to be clear, this is separate from the Half-Cent for Schools that was approved by voters in 2018. That was strictly for upgrading our existing school buildings and new construction. It was about improving the *places* where our children learn.

The One Mill is about the *people* who are serving our children and the technology they need to do it. It's about protecting the jobs of about 320 people and the economic benefits that go with them.

As both a parent and a businessman, I recognize the value of having high-quality schools in our community. That's why I've once again taken on the role of chair of Citizens for Strong Schools, a group of Alachua County residents who are advocating for the One Mill.

If you'd like to be part of this effort, please visit our website at yesforonemill.org. Most of all, I encourage you to vote YES for the One Mill on Nov. 3 and to encourage everyone you know to do the same.

Mark McGriff is chair of Citizens for Strong Schools.