

News Clips

Headlines

Denver Post

Friday, February 15, 2008

- Benson's backing mixed
- School bill offers cash to build
- Funds from mill-levy freeze won't be frozen before trial

Rocky Mountain News

Friday, February 15, 2008

- Romanoff unveils plan to fix schools

Denver Post

Friday, February 15, 2008

Benson's backing mixed

Fifty civic leaders sign a letter voicing support for the CU finalist, but faculty and student panels express doubts.

By Allison Sherry

The Denver Post

<mailto:asherry@denverpost.com?subject=The%20Denver%20Post:%20Benson's%20backing%20mixed>

Article Last Updated: 02/15/2008 01:30:37 AM MST

A group of business leaders, foundation heads, lawyers and former city officials wrote Thursday to support University of Colorado presidential finalist Bruce Benson — given that he promises to put his partisan politics aside.

"We know his commitment to quality education in general and to the University of

Colorado in particular," says the letter, addressed to CU's nine regents and signed by more than 50 civic leaders.

"We are also aware of Bruce's passionate engagement in political matters. . . . We understand that Bruce has pledged to abstain from all partisan political activity if he is selected."

Former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb sent a separate letter offering his support for Benson.

Benson, an oilman and Republican operative, is the sole finalist for the CU job, a controversial decision that has sparked lively forums at all four campuses and protests in Boulder.

In a fresh sign of the depth of the opposition, the Boulder Faculty Assembly on Thursday rejected by a 40-4 vote a nonbinding resolution in support of Benson's appointment.

And later in the evening, the University Student Union Legislative Council passed a resolution voicing "great concern over the process in which this candidate was selected."

Among those signing the letter supporting Benson was Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet, whom Benson opposed when Bennet was vying for the DPS post in 2005. When Bennet won the approval of the school board, however, his first voice-mail message was from Benson, who assured him he would do anything Bennet needed for DPS.

"He's absolutely held true to his word," Bennet said.

School bill offers cash to build

The proposal would tap a state fund to help districts with their mounting construction needs.

By Tim Hoover The Denver Post

Tim Hoover: 303-954-1626 or thoover@denverpost.com

Like other rural schools struggling with building needs, Indian Peaks Charter School in Granby holds classes in trailers.

But Polly Gallagher , principal of the 40-pupil K-8 school, said the new lunchroom is an improvement. It's a tent with a gravel floor and a space heater.

“The kids used to eat in the classrooms,” she said.

Gallagher was one of a number of educators and children’s advocates who testified in favor of a bill Thursday that would tap a portion of a state fund to pump up to \$500 million into schools for construction needs in coming years. With matching funding from school districts, the plan could mean as much as \$1 billion in construction projects for schools with leaky roofs, no heating or air conditioning and, in some cases, buildings ready to fall down.

The state fund is financed by land-use revenues from 3 million acres the federal government gave Colorado in 1876 to benefit schools. Revenue from the fund — which includes money from leasing fees and oil and gas royalties — has always gone for education funding, but a robust state economy the previous five years nearly doubled the fund’s annual income to \$85 million.

The bill would take part of the growth and devote it to school construction needs, which could be more than \$30 million a year.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff and Senate President Peter Groff, both Denver Democrats, and Sen. Gail Schwartz, D-Snowmass Village, are sponsoring the legislation, which also had Republican supporters. Treasurer Cary Kennedy, a Democrat, helped craft the proposal.

A state auditor’s report said that 88 percent of Colorado’s 178 school districts reported unsafe building conditions. Supporters of the bill said 80 districts can’t raise the money to construct new buildings.

Romanoff stressed that there isn’t enough money in the plan to fix every school’s problems, adding, though, “to say we can’t do everything so therefore we should do nothing doesn’t make any sense at all.”

The proposal, which also has the support of Gov. Bill Ritter, is likely to pass.

The House Education Committee heard testimony on the bill Thursday and will continue Monday.

Funds from mill-levy freeze won’t be frozen

before trial

A bill that would have set aside the money generated by Gov. Bill Ritter's controversial mill levy freeze died in a committee hearing Thursday on a party-line vote.

Sen. Scott Renfroe, R-Greeley, said the state needs to set aside the money in case it loses a lawsuit backed by a conservative group that argues the freeze is unconstitutional.

"If that happens, local school districts will probably have to repay the taxpayers for money the state collected on their behalf," Renfroe said at a Senate Finance Committee hearing. "And they don't have that money. Which means the state is going to have to help them do that."

Ritter pushed a plan through the legislature last year that kept mill levies — the rate at which businesses and homeowners are assessed property tax — from falling when property values rose, as they normally would have under state law.

Initial estimates were that the freeze would generate \$1.74 billion, but the latest figures put the amount at nearly double, \$3.8 billion.

Ritter has said the additional money should be used to fund preschool and full-day kindergarten programs.

"We're moving ahead," said Evan Dreyer, the governor's spokesman. "We're confident that we will prevail in court if the lawsuit proceeds." A group of taxpayers, organized by the conservative Independence Institute, filed suit in December, claiming the freeze violated state law requiring voters to approve tax increases. A trial is scheduled for May. The bill died on a 4-3 party-line vote.

John Ingold, The Denver Post

Rocky Mountain News

Friday, February 15, 2008

Romanoff unveils plan to fix

schools

By Steven K. Paulson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — The Edison 54 school district east of Colorado Springs is so strapped for cash that when the well stopped working recently, Superintendent David Grosche was forced to ration bottled water.

In Crowley County, school officials put a gutter inside a gymnasium to funnel away water from a leaky roof because they didn't have money to fix it. And in Holly, school officials got a grant to buy cable wire to lash together the crumbling facade of the local school building.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, said that is unacceptable. He introduced a plan Thursday that would leverage up to \$1 billion in funds from school trust lands — farms, ranches and commercial property that are owned by the state — to provide money for public education.

“Every child deserves a safe, healthy place to go to school,” Romanoff said. “It’s tough to learn when the roof is caving in or your desk is falling through the floor.”

Romanoff told the House Education Committee that 88 percent of Colorado schools have reported health or safety problems, but 80 out of the 178 school districts can't raise enough money to fix them. Romanoff said many aging school buildings need to be replaced.

The committee heard testimony Thursday but delayed a vote so lawmakers could study it.

State Treasurer Cary Kennedy said the trust funds will be protected.

“This is legacy legislation,” she said. “Without raising taxes, and with cooperation and consensus, we are finding a way to rebuild and repair schools across Colorado.”