

# Lashutka, Ricart join forces to push for a

By Julie R. Bailey  
Dispatch Schools Reporter

Columbus Mayor Greg Lashutka and car dealer Fred Ricart are two of central Ohio's most recognizable faces.

The Eastland Vocational School District is banking on their popularity to convince voters to support a permanent 0.8-mill operating levy during a special election Feb. 3.

Both Lashutka and Ricart have endorsed the levy and will appear in a 30-second commercial to promote the tax request. The commercial will be aired on Coaxial Communications cable stations starting Tuesday.

This is the district's eighth consecutive attempt to get help from voters. If passed, the levy would bring in \$3.2 million a year, starting next January, to preserve programs and upgrade equipment at its two career centers — Eastland in Groveport and Fairfield near Carroll, Ohio.

The levy would cost the owner of a \$100,000 home about \$25 more in property taxes annually.

"The success rates of these centers are exceptional," Lashutka said. Ninety-three percent of Eastland's graduates — and 90 percent of adult graduates — begin a career

in their chosen fields within six months.

"More than 6,000 adults attend full- or part-time classes each year, many from the Columbus area," Lashutka said. "And with over 400 business advisers keeping the curriculum up-to-date and market-driven, I'm convinced it's money well spent."

Lashutka also endorsed Eastland's unsuccessful attempt to get an identical levy passed in November.

This time, the district is enlisting more support to promote the need for more revenue, said Ross Dunlap, Eastland's acting superintendent.

"We had to develop strategies based on the assumption that we are the best-kept secret in town," Dunlap said.

"We wanted to identify high-profile people to carry the banner for vocational education. I think people will pay attention to Mayor Lashutka and Fred Ricart more than a Ross Dunlap.

"And when they share their thoughts about who we are and what we are all about, that will hopefully have an impact on the public."

The district, operating on a \$9.5 million budget this year, offers job-training programs for about 1,000 juniors and seniors from 16 school districts in Franklin, Fairfield

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and Pickaway counties.

Ricart, co-owner of the Ricart Automotive Group, said that more than 40 Ricart employees are Eastland graduates.

"They are some of our best employees," Ricart said. "I'm pretty impressed with what they are doing at Eastland."

To promote the open houses at the career centers last week, Sally Jackson, president of the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, did a radio spot and pledged the chamber's support for the levy request.

In an unprecedented move in November, the Columbus chamber endorsed the Eastland levy — the first time the chamber vowed its support for a district other than Columbus Public Schools.

"As chamber president, I'm reminded every day that providing skilled workers is critical to retaining, expanding and attracting businesses to central Ohio," Jackson said.

## Approval of Eastland levy

The district's campaign committee has received about \$25,000 in donations, and about \$4,000 is being used for advertising, including air time for the Lashutka-Ricart commercial, Dunlap said.

Coaxial, which serves eastern Franklin county and parts of Delaware, Fairfield, Licking and Pickaway counties, picked up the tab for production of the commercial.

A cable-television commercial that will be aired by MediaOne in Fairfield County will feature Jennifer Johns, president of Mid West Fabricating, in Lancaster, and State Rep. Jon D. Myers, R-Lancaster.

"My company takes advantage of the adult training programs available at Fairfield," Johns said.

"Having a career center right in the county is extremely convenient. And with employees getting up-to-date training on job skills, that makes a better company."

Voters in the 700-square-mile district have not approved a levy for the vocational system since 1986.

The current campaign has pushed for passage of the levy in the school districts that have historically voted down Eastland's requests.

School districts that passed the levy in November were Gahanna-Jefferson, Grove-

port Madison, Reynoldsburg and Whitehall, all in Franklin County.

Rejecting the levy were Canal Winchester, Hamilton Local and New Albany-Plain Local in Franklin County; Amanda-Clearcreek, Berne Union, Bloom Carroll, Fairfield Union, Liberty Union-Thurston, Pickerington and Walnut Township in Fairfield County; and Teays Valley in Pickaway County.

Bexley's school district contracts with Eastland and doesn't vote on levies.

"I'm telling residents in my district the cold, hard facts, and they seem to be responding positively," said John Schiller, superintendent of Liberty Union-Thurston schools in Baltimore.

"I tell them that vocational education is mandated by the state — school districts don't have the choice to provide it," he said.

"If we pass this levy, this school district (its taxpayers) would pay \$174,000" for the 31 programs now provided by Eastland, Schiller said. Without Eastland, the district's taxpayers would pay \$400,000 for 12 programs mandated by the state if the district joined in a program among Fairfield County school districts.

"I tell them, either pay now or pay later," Schiller said. "It's just that simple."

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