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Senate gives initial OK to school-building bill

The measure would soften the effect of Jordan District split

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A controversial bill that aims to soften the effect of Jordan District's split on the west side while essentially guaranteeing a property tax hike for the rest of Salt Lake County received initial approval in the Senate Tuesday afternoon following about an hourlong debate.

The Senate OK'd SB48, sponsored by Senate Majority Whip Dan Eastman, R-Bountiful, on second reading by an 18-to-11 vote a strong predictor of the bill's ultimate success in the chamber. The Senate still has to take a final, or third-reading, vote before the bill can go to the House for debate.

SB48 would add \$28.7 million to a state building aid program doubling its size to help 25 small-tax-base school districts build schools, receiving full benefits once they reach a certain taxing threshold. Alpine District stands to get \$11.4 million, more than double its current aid.

But the bill also equalizes some property tax revenues in Salt Lake County. The east- and west-side Jordan, Murray, Salt Lake City and Granite districts would pool money. Jordan-west would come out of it with an extra \$12 million. But Salt Lake City School District would lose \$6 million; Granite, \$1.4 million; Murray, nearly \$1 million; and east-side Jordan District, \$3.7 million all likely requiring a property tax increase to fill the hole.

Sen. Scott McCoy, D-Salt Lake, and several other Salt Lake County legislators balked at the bill as robbing Peter to pay Paul.

"This is like your neighbors getting a divorce and the judge ordering you to pay alimony and child support," McCoy said.

Supporters praised Eastman for striking a compromise, though imperfect, to finally address long-standing building finance inequities statewide. **Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, urged legislators to act for the greater good.**

"The vote we take on this bill is a statesmanship IQ test," he said.

Sen. Chris Buttars, R-West Jordan, didn't have much good to say about the bill, but he voted for it anyway.

"No, this don't solve it," Buttars said of the building finance problems exacerbated by the east-side secession. "But I'm going along with it because it's a start."

At one point, he described the bill in language that he later publicly apologized for on the Senate floor, saying it could be taken as racist.

"In no way did I mean that to be degrading in any way," he said. "I just got my mouth a little bit ahead of my head here."

When the east side seceded from Jordan District last November, voters took with them more than half the district's tax base and fewer than half of the kids. The fast-growing west side now needs more money to build enough schools. Legislators last summer vowed to create some kind of building equalization.

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