

Harlan County School Tax Rate Remains Unchanged For Sixth Year

District points to audits, public financial records as costs continue to rise

HARLAN — As Harlan County property tax bills arrive in mailboxes, Harlan County Public Schools officials are reminding taxpayers that the school district’s property tax rate has not increased.

The Harlan County Board of Education voted during an Aug. 20 special meeting to retain its existing rate of 54.8 cents per \$100 of assessed property value for the 2026-27 school year.

The rate has now remained unchanged for six consecutive years. The district’s rate was actually lowered from 54.9 cents per \$100 of assessed value in 2019-20 to 54.8 cents in 2020-21 and has remained at that level since.

As required by law, the proposed tax rates were published prior to the board’s action, including through a legal notice in a local newspaper, as well as on social media.

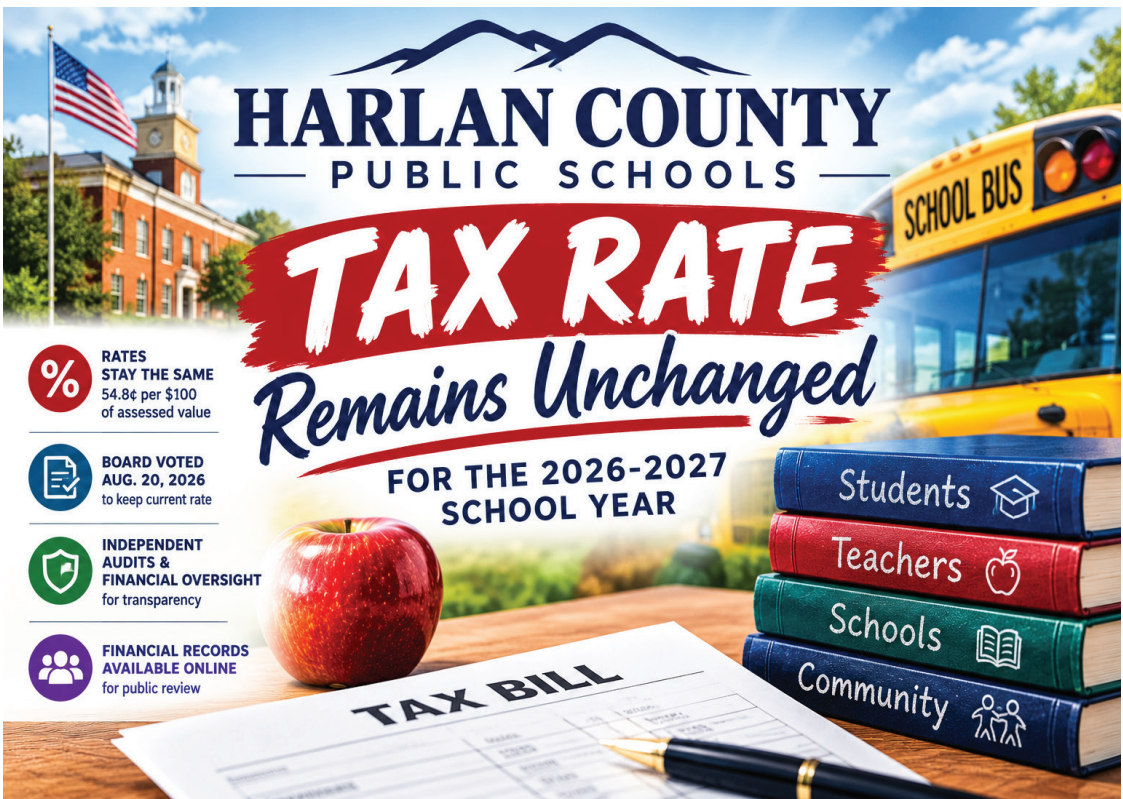
“With the increased costs associated with so many supplies and other expenditures, I am elated the board of education was able to avoid raising taxes again this year,” Superintendent Brett W. Johnson said.

“I know this is important to taxpayers as we strive daily to be good stewards of those critical tax dollars. Costs are going up for our families at home and we know we must continue to be good stewards.”

While the district has maintained the same tax rate, officials said increasing costs for supplies, services and other expenditures continue to put pressure on school district budgets.

During the September board meeting, Assistant Superintendent of Finance Jody Gilliam cautioned board members about the importance of carefully monitoring expenditures and reducing spending in an effort to avoid or limit the need for future tax increases.

“The district’s financial



decisions are not made in isolation,” Johnson said. “They are subject to board oversight, public meetings and independent financial review.”

Audits cited as part of financial oversight

The district undergoes an independent financial audit each year, with the results presented to and reviewed by the board of education and made available to the public.

At the board’s February 2026 meeting, Artie White, an auditor with White and Associates, reported no findings involving the district’s financial statements or federal programs.

The Harlan Enterprise quoted White as telling the board, “Basically, there were no findings on the financial statement or the federal program level. If we ever did find something wrong with the school district, we would have to set up a corrective action plan. You didn’t have that. So, obviously, you did an excellent job.”

Gilliam said the district’s audit reports have received “unmodified” opinions.

“An unmodified audit

opinion is an important distinction,” Gilliam said. “It means the independent auditor determined that the financial statements are fairly presented, in all material respects, in accordance with the applicable accounting standards.”

An unmodified opinion indicates the auditor found no material misstatements requiring a modified opinion, Gilliam said.

Johnson said the independent review provides an important additional level of accountability to taxpayers.

“We are a public agency and we value the public’s trust in what we do each day to operate our schools and district to provide the best education possible to Harlan County students,” Johnson said. “We expect our school and district staff to be dollar wise because we owe that to the taxpayers.”

Financial records available to public

Johnson also encouraged residents with questions about the district’s finances to examine the financial records available to the public rather

than relying solely upon statements made on social media or even by school officials.

“As a result, perhaps the most important point I want to stress is that community members do not have to rely on social media posts — or even statements from school district officials — to learn about the district’s finances,” Johnson said. “The information is public and available for the public to review.”

Harlan County Public Schools maintains a variety of financial documents on its website, including independent audit reports for the past five years; unaudited financial reports and balance sheets dating to the 2020-21 school year; paid invoices; check reconciliation records; monthly financial reports; and vendor reports detailing district expenditures.

The records can be accessed through the Harlan County Public Schools website by selecting “F” from the pull-down menu and then selecting “Financial Reports.”

“All those reports are there for the public to see,” Johnson said. “Providing access to these records is part of the district’s commitment to transparency and accountability. Don’t take our word for it, look at the records yourself.”

Tax rate and tax bill not necessarily the same

Gilliam also emphasized that an unchanged tax rate does not necessarily mean an individual property owner’s tax

bill will remain unchanged.

The school board’s property tax rate has remained at 54.8 cents per \$100 of assessed value since it was lowered for the 2020-21 school year. However, a property’s assessed value can change.

“An individual’s property tax bill can change when the assessed value of that property changes, even when the tax rate itself does not,” Gilliam said.

The Harlan County Board of Education does not have a role in determining property valuations.

“That distinction is important when discussing property taxes and helps explain why a taxpayer’s bill could change without the school board increasing its tax rate,” Gilliam said.

Johnson said the district is “truly doing more with less” as it deals with a number of unfunded or underfunded mandates passed down over the years. Those financial challenges make responsible budgeting and oversight increasingly important, he said.

Johnson said questions about public finances are legitimate and taxpayers have every right to ask how public money is being managed, noting that he is a taxpayer as well.

“The best answers, however, are found in the public record,” Johnson said. “For Harlan County Public Schools, that record — including tax rates, financial reports, vendor reports, balance sheets and independent audits — is available for anyone to examine.”

Johnson also pointed to programs and opportunities provided to Harlan County students through outside community and educational organizations.

“We have been blessed in Harlan County to have organizations such as Save the Children, PRI, GEAR UP, and so many others add programs and activities for our students,” Johnson said.

“These are not directly impacting our budget but are tremendous resources and benefit our students and staff. We are appreciative of these and our community is blessed by the employment opportunities they bring.”

Ordinance # 113.54

AN ORDINANCE LEVYING THE ANNUAL AD VALOREM TAX FOR CITY PURPOSES IN THE CORPORATE LIMITS OF THE CITY OF HARLAN, KENTUCKY

WHEREAS, Kentucky Revised Statute (KRS) 92.280 requires that the legislative body of each city annually levy an ad valorem tax for city purposes, and;

WHEREAS, KRS 92.330 requires that all taxes be levied by ordinance, and;

WHEREAS, KRS 83A.130, 140 and 150 require that the legislative body, by ordinance provide for sufficient revenue to operate city government, and;

WHEREAS, the city has calculated the tax rates for real and personal property in accordance with KRS chapter 132;

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT ORDAINED, by the City of Harlan Kentucky, as follows:

SECTION ONE: TAX LEVY – Real estate and personal property

A. An ad valorem tax rate of .466 cents on each \$100 (one hundred dollars) assessed value of real property subject to taxation under the laws of the State of Kentucky is hereby levied for city purposes.

B. An ad valorem tax rate of .4879 cents on each \$100 (one hundred dollars) assessed value of personal property subject to taxation under the laws of the State of Kentucky is hereby levied for city purposes.

SECTION TWO: DUE DATE, PAYMENT, DISCOUNT AND PENALTY

All said taxes shall be due and payable at the City Offices on or before the 31st day of December, 2026. There will be no discount for taxes paid prior to the due date. Taxes paid after the due date shall be assessed a ten percent (10%) penalty. In addition to the penalty, taxes paid after the due date shall be charged interest at the rate of eighteen percent (18%) per annum calculated from the due date.

SECTION THREE: EFFECTIVE DATE AND USE THEREOF

This ordinance applies to the 2026 calendar year tax assessment and all receipts shall be used for city purposes and accounted in the 2026/2027 fiscal year and subsequent fiscal years in reference to delinquent collections.

Date of First Reading: August 24, 2026

Date of Second Reading and Adoption: September 14, 2026

Mayor

Attest: City Clerk

OCTOBER 17TH, 2026
Downtown Harlan's
Fall Fest
12PM-8PM
Fall in love with Harlan

GREAT FOOD TRUCKS!

LOTS OF VENDORS!

FREE FAMILY FUN:
LIVE MUSIC - HAY RIDES - PUMPKIN PATCH - GHOST WALK - RAVENS EGG HUNT - COSTUME CONTEST WITH CASH PRIZES - CARNIVAL GAMES - AND MORE!
Applications online or apply at the Harlan Center!