

CG-B residents get budget say on Sept. 22

Written by CAROL POMEDAY

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Financing \$6.1 million school construction initiative contributes to projected 23-cent tax rate increase

Residents in the Cedar Grove-Belgium School District will be asked to set a tax levy of \$5.5 million, an increase of \$250,000 over the 2009 levy, at the annual meeting Wednesday, Sept. 22.

The meeting will begin at 7 p.m. in the high school study hall.

If the district's equalized valuation increases 2%, the tax rate is expected to be \$8.89 per \$1,000, an increase of 23 cents or 2.7% more than last year. The district's equalized valuation is projected to be \$625.4 million.

The district expects to receive \$5.8 million in state aids, \$330,000 more than last year because enrollment increased last year, Supt. Steve Shaw said.

This year's enrollment of 1,134 students is about the same as last year.

The largest expense in the \$10.6 million proposed budget is \$7.9 million for salaries and benefits, a 7.38% increase. Insurance and other benefits are expected to rise 10%.

The district's debt service will be \$1.4 million, \$130,000 more than last year, which includes the first payments on a \$6.1 million building project.

"The numbers will change, but I think they're pretty close," Business Manager Julie Birschbach said.

"The difficult thing is we don't know what the equalized valuation will be," Shaw said. "Last year, we figured a 5% increase, but this year we're using 2%."

To stay within state levy limits, each principal was given an amount that could be used in their school, Shaw said. Principals met with teachers to develop their school's budget, then the administrative staff put together the budget.

Middle School Principal Jeanne Courneene said the process was empowering for the staff.

"It made us more efficient. We had to prioritize every item and figure out what was best for the students and school overall," Courneene said.

The district ended the fiscal year with a fund balance, which enabled it to pay for a grease interceptor to prevent grease from the school's kitchen entering Cedar Grove's wastewater system.

"It turned out our line was hooked directly into the village's system and had to be separated,"

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Shaw said.

The budget includes sharing Food Services Manager Jane Mentink with the Oostburg School District, which will save \$12,000 in salaries and benefits. Oostburg's superintendent requested the arrangement, Shaw said. An additional part-time server will be hired for four hours a day.

"Even with the added hours, we will save money," Supt. Steve Shaw said. "I think you're going to see districts doing a lot more sharing. If it doesn't work, we can always change it."

An item that is not in this year's budget, but may show up next year is the purchase of e-readers, such as Kindles, for some classes.

Three new senior English classes — short stories, nonfiction and public communication — were approved for 2011-2012.

"Why not offer these courses with Kindles?" board member Chad Hoopman suggested.

Courneene, who used the machine for graduate courses, was enthusiastic about the prospect.

"I can see students downloading short stories and having discussion circles with them," she said. "Short stories load in five minutes. You can highlight on it and look up a word instantly."

Books can be downloaded for \$10 and remain on the Kindle indefinitely, she said.

Hoopman said he hopes to see fewer textbooks purchased and more on-line and e-technology incorporated as curriculums are reviewed.

Courneene agreed.

"Students hate to journal, but you ask them to blog and they go at it. They don't think of it as homework," she said.