

Residents OK levy hike opposed by president

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
Wednesday, 05 October 2011 18:23

Voters, School Board leader differ on budget that would result in 4.3% tax increase, but figures could change

The Sept. 28 annual meeting of the Cedar Grove-Belgium School District turned into a discussion of the technical education program, the errors or wisdom of past boards and the need to not increase taxes.

Residents approved a tax levy not to exceed \$5.8 million to support a \$10.3 million budget, but those figure will likely change when school officials learn the district's equalized valuation and how much state aid it will receive.

If the district's equalized valuation remains at \$598.4 million, the tax rate would be \$9.67 per \$1,000 equalized valuation, a 40-cent or 4.3% increase over last year.

School Board President Jim Lautenschlaeger cast the lone vote against the levy.

"I don't want to see us levy that high and raise taxes 4.3%," Lautenschlaeger said after the meeting. "We as a School Board will be sitting down and discussing this budget. We met with administrators Friday and went through some of our concerns."

He pledged to cut expenses or take more money from the district's reserve fund if necessary.

Business manager Julie Birschbach, who developed the budget which School Board members saw only a few days before the meeting, said she expects to get firm figures from the state in mid-October.

Birschbach tried to explain the complicated state aid formula that is based on a three-year enrollment average and will decrease this year due to the state budget repair bill.

Personnel costs will total \$7.5 million, a 4.3% decrease. Salaries will increase \$200,000, but the district's cost for benefits will decrease 19% to \$1.9 million because teachers and other staff will pay 12% of their health insurance premium and half of the contribution to their state retirement fund.

Craig Droppers, treasurer of the Town of Holland, said he was surprised to learn the new technical-education addition is not being used much this year.

"I was a little disappointed because I thought that was going to be on the fast track," Droppers said.

High School Principal Larry Theiss said a tech-ed curriculum must be developed before equipment is purchased or leased. New tech-ed teacher Curt Teunissen is working with

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Technical College in Cleveland to develop an accredited curriculum, including a tool-and-die measurement certification program.

The district is also working with the technical college to obtain grants earmarked for teaching job skills and developing regional tech-ed centers, Theiss said. Local businesses have donated some equipment, he said, including a vehicle lift and high-tech calibrated tools for the measurement class.

Next year, basic metals and an expanded small engines program is planned, Theiss said.

"I don't see it hitting full stride until 2013," he said, noting state budget restrictions will affect how much can be spent on the program.

He said the district's tech-ed teachers may take or teach summer classes at LTC with the aim of offering the classes here.

Droppers suggested local trades people and industries be involved in curriculum development because they know what is needed in the workplace.

"It starts with infrastructure," Lautenschlaeger said. "We have that. Now, let's fill it with the tools we need."

Droppers said he was one of many in the community who opposed closing the old technical-education center and selling the equipment years ago.

However, Joe Wisse, who was a board member at the time, disagreed.

"A lot of what we had in the shop was government surplus and was unsafe and difficult to repair. We didn't have people qualified to teach tech-ed," Wisse said.

Board member Gina Sotelo noted there have been paradigm shifts in education with the emphasis on technical education changing.

Wisse suggested past school officials be invited to a meeting to discuss issues from a historical perspective.

Cedar Grove-Belgium graduates should also be surveyed to determine the district's strong and weak points in preparing them for college and work, Droppers said, noting he's made that suggestion several times.

Supt. Steve Shaw said the difficulty is getting past students to respond.

In a related budget matter, Shaw said he was told by an energy consultant that the middle school could have substantial energy savings because of the renovation.

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“The middle school is going very well,” he said. “It’s a fantastic building. It looks good on the outside, and it’s even better on the inside.”

Droppers suggested an open house be held for the public to tour the buildings to see the \$6.1 million referendum project.

The Parent Teacher Organization held open houses and ice cream socials at all buildings on Sept. 22, but another one may be planned, Lautenschlaeger said.