

School Board struggles to cover budget shortfall

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Reinstating athletic fees, closing swimming pool among measures drawing consideration

In an effort to cut almost \$500,000 from the 2012-13 proposed budget, the Cedar Grove-Belgium School Board is considering reinstating athletic fees, eliminating funding for field trips, closing the swimming pool, eliminating reimbursement to teachers for credits they take and reducing or discontinuing payments in lieu of taking insurance.

In addition, the board decided not to replace a copy aide and a teacher's aide, who both retired, and principals have already notified secretaries that their work week this summer will be reduced to one day a week from mid-July to mid-August.

On Wednesday, June 27, the board asked the principals to consider making that two days a week after listening to concerns voiced by two secretaries, but left the decision to the administrative team.

"You have to trust your principals," Supt. Steve Shaw said.

The swimming pool last year required a tax levy of almost \$130,000, he said. The board decided to tackle the swimming pool issue at another meeting.

The list of cuts proposed by administrators last week totaled \$500,000. The staff suggested other measures to cut expenses, but Shaw asked the board to wait until the potential savings could be calculated before acting on those suggestions.

The budget figures do not include a pay raise for teachers and staff, which still must be negotiated, Shaw noted. The goal, he said, is not to affect students' education or the ability of teachers to teach.

When board members balked at some of the cuts proposed by administrators, Shaw noted other school districts have been faced with short-falls for several years and have had to cut teachers or increase class sizes, something he opposes.

"None of these are easy calls. When you start cutting, you're going to affect someone," Shaw said. "I don't think there's a board member here who doesn't want to reward our staff with increased pay. Unless the board wants to raise the levy, then we don't have to do this (cut expenses), but I don't think you want to do that."

Charging fees for participating in athletics prompted some board members to balk. The recommendation to charge \$25 per sport in middle school

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and \$50 per sport in high school was kept on the cut list, but Board President Jim Lautenschlaeger emphasized it is only a proposal at this point.

Students who qualify for free or reduced lunches would be exempt from the fees.

“A fee is a tax, but now it’s being raised only for those who participate,” board member Todd Bucher said.

A proposal to not pay assistant coaches is also on the board, as well as eliminating pay for coaches’ clinics and trips to state tournaments unless Cedar Grove-Belgium students are playing in the tournament.

“When we look at some of the things we’re eliminating or cutting, like secretaries’ time, we have to spread this out a little bit,” Shaw said. “I believe athletics has to be a part of this (cost savings).”

He said booster clubs could choose to fund some of the items cut.

Lautenschlaeger was opposed to cutting funding for field trips.

“You’re cutting educational experiences by cutting field trips,” he said.

Several elementary teachers said parents already pay the major cost for field trips with the district providing transportation.

Also on the cutting block is reimbursement for credits teachers take, but staff development will remain at \$30,000, with \$20,000 being spent this summer for teachers to work on curriculum.

“That’s a tough call because we want our teachers to continue to improve, but we need money for staff development,” Shaw said.

The board is also considering no longer paying teachers who do not take insurance because they have coverage through their spouse’s insurance. Some suggested eliminating it all together, noting private businesses don’t do that, while others favored decreasing it.

The argument is that the teachers would take the district’s health insurance at a greater cost to the district.

Since teachers now pay 18% of the premium, board member Dan Bruhn said he doubts that will happen.

“You have to be careful because we still want to be the district of choice,” Business Manager Kris DeBruine said. “With school choice, it’s so easy to switch districts. Part of that is being a good employer. You need good teachers.”

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Special Education Director Tamra O'Keefe proposed cutting her department's budget by \$150,000, but DeBruine suggested the board count on saving \$75,000 until she has a chance to talk to O'Keefe. Some proposed cuts may result in a reduction of federal funds, she said.

The board decided to postpone doing roof repairs on a portion of the middle school until the 2013-14 school year based on a recommendation from the maintenance staff and cancelled its contract with Alinea for long-range planning.

The budget discussion will continue at the Wednesday, July 11, board meeting.