

Budget shortfall prompts school staff cuts

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Facing \$883,000 dilemma, Grafton board begins fiscal changes that are also expected to include fee hikes

Facing a projected shortfall of \$883,000 in the 2013-14 budget, the Grafton School Board on Monday began approving staff reductions as part of changes that are also expected to include fee increases.

Board members agreed to eliminate one full-time art teaching position at Grafton High School and a four-tenths elementary-school music teaching post.

In addition, the board concurred with a Finance Committee recommendation to pare by 20% teaching positions in German, English/communication arts, Spanish and social studies; eliminate a special-education aide, elementary library-media center staff member and the fifth-grade band program; and reduce building budgets by 5%.

Last month, the committee and administrators began reviewing cost-saving options in response to the budget shortfall, which is fueled by rising costs and aid cuts.

Supt. Jeff Pechura said the district is also taking the steps in response to declining enrollment. The staff cuts will pare the high school art staff from two to one full-time teacher, but there will be fewer students in art classes, he noted.

“We’re expecting a reduction of about 40 students in enrollment. We have a large graduating class this year, and the freshman class coming in is much smaller,” he said.

“One thing that decreased enrollment has allowed us to make some of these reductions in a natural flow of events.”

Pechura said most of the staff cuts will be made through attrition and reduced contracts rather than layoffs.

“The people are being notified. It’s preliminary, but we need to begin looking at ways to balance the budget,” he said.

Mark Powell, the district’s director of business services and human resources, said the reductions are expected to save \$289,204. He said the administration and Finance Committee recommended fee increases that would generate \$76,116 in additional revenue.

The proposed increases include raising registration fees — by \$10 in elementary schools and \$15 at the middle and high schools — and the high school parking fee from \$30 to \$90. Athletic fees would also be increased, with middle-schoolers charged \$40 per sport with a maximum of \$80 per student and \$200 per family and high-schoolers charged \$100 per sport with a maximum of \$200 per student and \$500 per family.

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However, the board tabled consideration of the fee increases after member Paul Lorge asked the committee to take a second look at the proposal.

“That’s an enormous increase for one year,” Lorge said.

Pechura said the district could also offset the shortfall by using part of its fund balance and raising taxes.

“It’s going to take a combination of things,” he said. “We have up to \$6 million for capital improvements, and some of them can’t be deferred. Others could be pushed back.”

Unlike some school districts, Grafton is in the early stages of its budget preparation, with the final spending plan not approved until fall. Adjustments in state aid will also affect the budget.

“It’s early in the process, but it’s clear that we will have to make changes,” Pechura said.

The Finance Committee was scheduled to resume its budget discussions at a Thursday, April 11, meeting.