

School budget cuts focus on staff reductions

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Preliminary recommendations call for paring personnel to provide up to \$568,000 in savings for 2014-15 year

Taking aim at an anticipated budget deficit of \$850,000 for the 2014-15 year, the Grafton School Board on Monday began reviewing a first round of personnel cuts that could pare more than half of the shortfall.

Supt. Mel Lightner presented preliminary recommendations calling for up to \$568,000 in staff reductions ranging from office and library staff to teachers and instructional coaches.

“This is the toughest budget I’ve had in 21 years (as a superintendent),” Lightner told the board.

Because staff salaries and benefits make up about 80% of district spending, “it is impossible to balance the budget without significant personnel reductions,” he added.

Lightner has been discussing cost-saving steps with an administrative budget committee. Although specific staff members have not been earmarked for job reductions or layoffs, Lightner outlined a plan that calls for the following reductions:

- \$260,000 by cutting the full-time equivalent of 2.5 instructional coaching positions.

“They provide a valuable service, but principals should be the primary coaches for teachers,” Lightner said.

- \$90,000 to \$180,000 by reducing library media specialists from three full-time positions to either two or one positions.

Depending on the reduction, libraries in each school would have to be staffed with assistants to keep them open, Lightner said.

- \$75,000 by cutting 1.1 Grafton High School teaching positions.

Based on enrollment projections, these cuts are likely to be a 0.6 position in business education and a 0.5 position in science, Lightner said.

- \$53,000 by reducing the district office staff from 5.75 to five full-time positions. The staff includes student, learning and business services and the superintendent’s office.

Lightner said the district has already implemented “several business efficiency measures” that will allow the office to operate with fewer employees.

In addition, Lightner recommended that salaries for all administrators and managers be frozen for the 2014-15 year.

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“In light of the depth of personnel reductions needed to balance the budget, it is more than appropriate and justified” to forego pay increases, he said.

The board did not act on the recommendations, but Lightner said the plan lays the groundwork for specific cuts, including staff layoffs, in the coming weeks.

“We don’t know specifically who will be laid off, but the most difficult decisions are yet to come,” Lightner said.

A board decision on staff cuts is expected by early April to meet the deadline for issuing layoff notices.

The committee is continuing to discuss other possible staff cuts, which Lightner said could include paring administrative staff hours, particularly in the summer, along with high school and middle school teaching positions and reading specialists.

The cuts may mean teachers will have more classes this fall, he added.

Lightner said the committee may also propose increasing student fees to help offset the budget deficit.

Proposed fee changes are expected to be presented to the board on March 24 along with other deficit-reducing recommendations.