

Newly formed community group unveils plans to raise money for projects district can't afford in budget

The budget crunch that's causing a growing number of school districts to curtail spending on classroom programs may soon be eased in Grafton.

Relief could come in the form of the Grafton Education Foundation, a newly formed nonprofit organization whose members plan to raise money through grants and private donations that will benefit students in the public school district.

"We saw a need, and we want to help," said Bob Hoffman, a former Grafton School Board member who has spearheaded the creation of the foundation and will serve as its president.

"School districts throughout Wisconsin are facing drastic reductions in state funding and can't afford a lot of programs for students. It's a growing concern, and this is a way we believe something can be done."

Hoffman, who retired four years ago, said he was asked last spring by School Board President Terry Ziegler and Supt. Jeff Pechura to consider organizing and serving on an education foundation. Hoffman said the idea intrigued him, especially after he saw similar fund-raising groups formed in area communities, including Port Washington, Cedarburg and Mequon.

"It's not a new idea. There are hundreds of foundations like this around the country, but we've never had one in Grafton," Hoffman said.

Unlike groups such as the Grafton Community Scholarship Foundation and Grafton Athletic Booster Club, the new organization will focus its efforts exclusively on educational projects in the district.

"We're not going to fund scholarships or extracurricular activities or buy uniforms," Hoffman said. "It's for projects and programs that will enhance classroom experiences for students from kindergarten through 12th grade."

It hasn't taken long for the new foundation to get up and running. During the summer, Hoffman compiled a list of 40 potential members, spoke to principals at all five district schools about plans for the organization and assembled a 15-member steering committee that laid the groundwork for operations.

The group set up a board of directors, whose first eight members provided a cross-section of local parents, current and former educators and other professionals. Besides Hoffman, the list included Richard Kranitz (secretary), Mike Donahue (treasurer), Renee Riddle, Steve Vepraskas, Cristy Bauer, Karen Walton and Dave Scherzer.

The board, which is being expanded to as many as 15 members, is scheduled to meet the

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second Thursday of each month.

Hoffman said the foundation established itself as a nonprofit organization in October and is already accepting donations. However, members are still in the process of applying for 501 (c)(3) status, a federal designation that will allow contributions made to the organization to be tax-deductible and make the group's income and earnings tax-exempt.

Any donations made now will become tax-exempt retroactively once the 501 (c)(3) status is received, Hoffman said.

"We're hoping to file with the IRS this fall," he added. "It could take several months for them to decide, but we're confident we will get the status."

Plans call for the foundation to review funding requests from teachers and principals in January and February and award grants in May for use in the following school year.

The grants will cover projects ranging from classroom equipment to educational field trips to teacher seminars, Hoffman said.

As examples of possible classroom purchases, he mentioned an amplification device that helps students hear their teacher more clearly and feedback equipment that allows students to respond to teachers through an electronic console.

"The projects could range in cost from a few hundred dollars to several thousand," Hoffman said. "The foundation would consider any requests of any size as long as they are for educational purposes."

Hoffman said foundation members hope to raise money through a variety of activities, including an annual community event, soliciting private donations and applying for grants from government agencies and other foundations.

"There are a number of high-profile organizations out there such as the Bill Gates Foundation that have money available for educational purposes," he said. "They're worth looking into."

One of the toughest challenges facing the foundation will be tapping into the generosity of local residents and companies during tough economic times.

"That will be a challenge, but the economy is showing signs of improving," Hoffman said. "We know that people want to help Grafton schools maintain their reputation for educational excellence."

On Monday, Hoffman gave a progress report to the School Board, which expressed support for the plans.

"When I called Bob to get involved in this, he jumped at the chance," Ziegler said. "I'm really excited. That's great."

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Hoffman said that in the near future the foundation will establish a Web site that will provide information and accept on-line donations.

Hoffman can be reached for more information by phone at 377-9325 or by e-mail at bjhoffmanwi@hotmail.com.