Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Despite complaints, board adopts preliminary package calling for reductions in guidance, library, paraprofessional spending

Confronted with an anticipated loss in state aid and increased operating costs, the Grafton School Board on Monday unanimously adopted a preliminary budget that calls for a 4.37% tax-rate hike for the 2010-11 school year.

But the decision didn't come until after the board heard protests from repre-sentatives of two employee unions and parents who objected to reducing guidance and library staff and trimming paraprofessional pay in the proposed $24.1 million spending package.

More than 50 people attended Monday's meeting, including 10 or so who asked the board to reconsider cutbacks in the draft budget recommended by an administrative team headed by Supt. Jeff Pechura.

Although the budget doesn't call for layoffs, the district has announced a plan to not replace several staff members who have retired or resigned — a move Pechura said will save $376,377.

Included in the plan are not replacing a high school guidance counselor, a library media director and a middle school family and consumer education teacher, as well as paring after-school pay for 28 paraprofessionals who work with special-education students.

The latter reduction, Pechura said, will limit paraprofessionals to 15 minutes of paid after-school time at Grafton High School, 30 minutes at John Long Middle School and 45 minutes at elementary schools.

In making the recommendations, Pechura said administrators considered reductions that would have "the least direct impact on student learning" and had to determine "if a program is worth the money we're putting into it."

"There are no easy decisions here, but we had to follow those criteria," he said.

Pam Nunez, a representative of the Grafton Paraprofessionals and Aides Association, told the board the decision will not only mean pay cuts for association members but will jeopardize the health and welfare of special-education students.

"We are the special-education teachers' eyes and ears when students are outside the classroom," Nunez said. "Your decision impacts the entire community."

Several parents of special-education students also said the paraprofessionals provided an invaluable service before and after the school day and asked the board to explore other cost-savings options.

“I know areas have to be cut, but this can be the difference between a student making it or not making it,” one mother said.

Jim Girmscheid, president of the Grafton Education Association teachers union, asked the board to reconsider plans for reducing guidance and library media staff. He also proposed rotating library specialists among schools to ensure elementary students will not be shortchanged.

“I think the guidance (reduction) plan needs to be expanded to keep the foundation we have,” said Girmscheid, a fifth-grade teacher at Grafton Elementary School.

Acting School Board President Eric Oleson said he appreciated audience members’ concerns and the board would continue to explore cost-savings options in preparing additional drafts of the budget before it is presented at the annual meeting in September.

“We don’t have all the necessary information,” Oleson said.

However, Pechura stood by his recommendations on Tuesday.

“We used a rational decision-making process,” he said.

“We sought feedback from the teachers union and aides union and considered their input but used a process that takes the emotion out of making decisions, which is what you have to do.”

Last fall, the board came under fire when it approved a budget that required a 13.3% tax-rate increase. District officials cited a loss of $1.1 million in state equalized aid as the biggest factor in the rate hike.

The aid reduction came after the board finalized a new contract with the GEA giving teachers a 4% increase in salary and benefits for 2009-10 and a 3.8% increase for 2010-11.

“The hard part of this is when you have revenue from the state not coming through, we have to look at making reductions,” Pechura said.

Anticipating a further cut in state aid this year, school officials began searching for ways to trim last fall, he added.

Business Manager Don Amundson said the preliminary 2010-11 budget calls for a total levy of $16.77 million, up $702,000 from 2009-10. Using no increase in the district’s total property valuation, he estimated the tax rate would increase 4.37% — from $10.44 per $1,000 of equalized value to $10.89 per $1,000.

That means the owner of a $250,000 house would pay $2,723 in taxes, or $114 more, to support school spending in 2010-11. For the owner of a $300,000 house, the increase would be

$137.

In preparing the preliminary budget, Amundson kept equalized aid at $7.29 million, the same amount the district received for 2009-10. However, school officials are poised for a likely decrease, which would require additional spending cuts, he noted.

The state is expected to provide equalized-aid figures to school districts by July 1.

“We don’t have any other sources of revenue within the school district to offset a possible loss in the state aid,” Amundson said.
Pechura said the district officials, including the Finance/Negotiations Committee, will consider further budget adjustments as soon as the aid figure is received.

“We haven’t had to make any layoffs, but if we have to, we will,” said Pechura, who noted the district has until July 15 to send out layoff notices.

Board member Paul Lorge, the Finance Committee chairman, said he is confident the district will work its way through the budget crunch. He said the district faced a similar problem in 2003 when a “Think Tank” group was formed to come up with ways to trim hundreds of thousands of dollars from the budget.

“The initial reaction was, ‘We can’t do this,’ but we did,” Lorge told the audience at Monday’s meeting.

“We persevered and worked through those challenges, and I have no doubt we can do it again.”