

Port-Saukville board OKs preliminary spending plan that includes funds for initiatives and addresses deficit

The Port Washington-Saukville School Board approved a preliminary 2013-14 budget Monday that not only addresses a \$570,000 deficit but includes funding for a host of initiatives.

Among the new programs funded at least in part by the spending plan, which was the subject of a public hearing prior to the board vote, are school security improvements, a new high school Project Lead the Way biomedical engineering class, an additional technology education teacher, 1,754 iPads and Chromebooks — one for every middle and high school student in the district — and on-going energy-saving capital improvement projects.

“Despite being a challenging budget, we’ve found a way to add a tech-ed teacher, include start-up costs of the Project Lead the Way program and provide funding for electronic devices for students,” Supt. Michael Weber said.

The budget appeared far more challenging in April when administrators predicted the district would face the largest structural deficit it has seen in years, in large part because Gov. Scott Walker’s proposed 2013-15 state budget seeks to keep the revenue cap for general school district operations — the amount of money schools can collect in state aid and local property taxes — flat for two years.

Two months later, the district unveiled a plan that combines reductions in costs such as utilities and health insurance with staffing changes that administrators said won’t affect core programs.

A significant factor was a reduction of nearly half of a projected 10% Humana health insurance increase that will save about \$100,000.

The district also expects to realize an estimated \$75,000 in energy savings.

In terms of staffing, the board does not plan to fill a vacant elementary school teaching position, as well as several part-time positions that equal another full-time teaching position.

Staffing for less-popular extracurricular activities will also be reduced, as will funding for overload classes — additional sections of courses added due to demand — at the high school.

In addition, the district will not fill a math consultant position or contract for those services resulting in a savings of about \$45,000, Weber said. Administrators didn’t find a candidate to fill the position, so the money budgeted was used to pay for consultant services this school year.

Also helping to balance the budget is a little more room under the district’s revenue limit granted by the state because of declining enrollment.

School budget upgrades security, technology

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
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“Overall, it’s a pretty positive picture,” Director of Business Services Jim Froemming said. “But this is very, very preliminary. Things always change between now and October.”

October is when the board approves the final budget and tax levy, and until then the exact amount of money the district has to spend and the tax implications won’t be known.

Administrators described the preliminary budget as a worst-case scenario and expect it will improve. If they are correct, the district will revise the budget by first reconsidering staffing decisions, Weber said.

What is not likely to change is the district’s commitment to new programs, which would be funded through a number of sources in the budget.

The school security initiative, which involves improvements at each of the elementary schools, including a remodeling project at Lincoln Elementary School, is to be funded with about \$200,000 from the fund equity, the district’s saving account.

Another \$25,000 from the fund equity account will be used to pay for start-up costs associated with the Project Lead the Way biomedical engineering course.

At the end of this month, the district will have a fund equity balance of \$4.8 million — roughly 15% of its general operating budget, Froemming said.

Most of the money for the purchase of student iPads and Chromebooks — part of a \$1 million technology initiative — is coming from a federal grant and was included in this school year’s budget. Some funding for the program, including proceeds from a proposed increase in the student technology fee, is included in the 2013-14 budget.

The \$1.8 million energy-saving initiative, which includes projects ranging from the replacement of boilers to the installation of high-efficiency lights in district buildings, will cost the district about \$195,000 a year in annual loan payments through the 2021-22 school year.

The district invested \$400,000 from fund equity in the project and borrowed the balance last year. The debt is not controlled by the revenue limits, which means the district can increase its property tax levy to pay it.

With the proposed state budget in flux and without property value calculations, the district’s tax predictions are an educated guess, administrators said.

As it stands now, the district is predicting a 0.2% increase in the property tax levy and rate. Theoretically, that would increase the average school tax bill by \$4 or \$5.