

Collections • Upper Darby School District

U. Darby residents get in their 2 cents on school budget



The 69th St. area ties Upper Darby to surrounding areas. APRIL SAUL / Staff Photographer



GALLERY: The 69th St. area ties Upper Darby to surrounding areas....

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By Rita Giordano, Inquirer Staff Writer

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They could swallow cutbacks in transportation and school administration, and even tolerate an increase in property taxes - within limits.

But residents of the Upper Darby School District gave a resounding "no way" to the hacking of beloved music and arts programs and high school sports.

Those were some of the findings in a report released Tuesday night by the University of Pennsylvania Project for Civic Engagement.

In February and March, the Penn Project conducted four community forums in the Delaware County school district during which more than 480 residents gave their input on how district officials could - or could not - close an estimated \$9.7 million budget deficit. The participants, who were divided into 19 groups, were given a wide array of budgeting choices and were asked to prioritize.

The Penn Project offered to get involved in Upper Darby - one of the largest districts in the state - after a \$13 million deficit last year threatened the district's well-known arts and music program and brought hundreds of concerned residents out to public meetings. Additional eleventh-hour state funds spared the programs, but librarians were cut.

The Penn Project's community input forum process was tried once before, in 2009, when Philadelphia faced a huge hole in its city budget.

One thing that came across loud and clear in Upper Darby, Penn Project leaders said, was that none of the choices were easy.

"Every piece of low-hanging fruit is a stretch," said Harris Sokoloff, Penn Project director, during his presentation to the district Tuesday.

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Of the 19 groups, only six were able to come up with enough economies to bring them to within 80 percent or more of the \$9.7 million goal. The group that came the closest - about 93 percent of the goal - had to resort to a significant tax increase and spending down of the district's fund balance, as well as administrative and recreation cutbacks, according to Sokoloff.

In this diverse, working-class district, where taxes are among the highest in the region, many are passionate about their children's education. Sokoloff said the forums got more than twice the number of participants expected.

District officials are not obligated to follow the residents' recommendations.

School Board President Maureen Carey indicated the board would consider the residents' input.

One of the broad themes that emerged from the forums, according to the report, was that residents wanted budget cuts to have the least possible impact on students. In addition, they thought the district should maintain and build on its strengths, such as its arts and music and kindergarten programs.

The report also contained residents' skepticism and mistrust about the Penn Project, including the menu of budget choices supplied to the participants.

For example, some residents felt the groups should have been able to consider recommending the district end its support agreement with Delaware County Community College that, in turn, gets district residents reduced tuition.

In the coming year, Upper Darby is expected to contribute \$1.07 million to the college, nearly \$806,000 of which will go toward the operating fund, according to Edward Smith, district director of business management.

Penn Project leaders said the option was not included in the choices presented to forum participants because it did not appear it could be done in time for this budget cycle.

Rachel Mitchell, a parent and school board candidate, said in an e-mailed statement that participants should have been given more information about the impact of the various budget actions presented to them.

District officials are expected to come up with a proposal by April 30 and then vote on a tentative budget on May 14, Smith said. The district is required to adopt a budget by June 30.

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