

News

Upper Darby School District again facing tough decisions on budget

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UPPER DARBY — Taxpayers were already told there will be a tax increase from the Upper Darby School District business manager but they won't know what will be affected until the tentative 2013-2014 budget is revealed Tuesday.

Business Manager Ed Smith previously announced the certainty of a tax hike in February when preliminary figures and a \$9.7 million shortfall were announced with his "best-guess estimate."

"This preliminary budget has been developed with the goal of maintaining our current programming," Smith said at the meeting earlier this year.

Since then, the governor announced an increase in public education funding with Upper Darby receiving a projected \$31.2 million, \$744,667 over this year's.

Smith reportedly did not anticipate the additional education funding when he prepared the preliminary budget.

"This is the good news," Smith said. "The bad news is the special education is again flat-funded."

According to Smith, Upper Darby will need to use an estimated \$400,000 of the district's additional funding to cover rising special education costs.

"We're at an 8.7 percent tax increase with a \$9.7 million shortfall," Smith said after receiving word of the state's increase in education funding. "If we just do the math there, it absolutely helps that we're getting more. It's less reductions that we need to make, but beyond that, we're not in a position to say what that means in terms of what's not to be reduced."

Colleen Kennedy, the founder of Save Upper Darby Arts (SUDA) is already predicting "how ugly" the cuts are going to have to be.

Kennedy was on the steering committee of the Penn Project when citizens were presented with an opportunity to recommend what cuts they could accept.

The district and the board have no obligation to accept those options.

The Penn Project, designed by the University of Pennsylvania Project for Civic Engagement, was conducted at the invitation of the school board.

Called “Tight Times, Tough Choices: Community Input into the District Budget,” the four forums were a way for citizens to select their preferences in handling the \$9.7 million shortfall.

Schools Superintendent Lou DeVlieger, who will retire at the end of the fiscal year, expressed his appreciation for the input of citizens.

“All I can say at this point is that the values expressed by the public through the Penn Study for Civic Engagement will be evident throughout the proposal that the Administration will be put forth to the Board on Tuesday evening,” DeVlieger said. “Although none of the recommendations are easy, I believe that the proposal will clearly support maintaining the key programs that the public values so dearly. We deeply appreciate the public’s input into helping to shape our decisions for this proposed final budget.

“My presentation on Tuesday evening will methodically go through the recommendations of the public and the value systems that the public wanted us to keep in mind. It is my sincere hope that everyone walks away feeling heard, appreciated, and supported.”

Members of SUDA, who expect cuts, are taking their initiative statewide and have released a video on YouTube to encourage everyone to sign and notify their legislators.

“As a steering committee member of the Penn Project series at UDSD, I know firsthand how ugly the cuts are going to have to be on Tuesday, just to make ends meet,” Kennedy said when the new video was released to take their efforts statewide.

“SUDA has gotten started a few days early, because we know how tough it is going to be to protect the best programs at UDSD for students. We’re enlisting the help of school districts across the commonwealth, so that together we can make a real difference for public school kids, who have really not been supported over the past two years.”

Kennedy aired her opinion on the effects lack of state funding had on the arts curriculum in the district after the high school’s drum line was named world champions.

“Last April, the programs that had set up these students for musical and academic success in high school were under siege thanks to statewide budget cuts against our public schools,” Kennedy wrote. “This, combined with our country’s obsession with testing above any meaningful learning opportunity, were a direct harm to students across the commonwealth and the country, and our community rose up to protect the programs that helped students the most.

“It has not been announced yet what will be cut from UDSD, but we can safely bet that the programs that were on the table last year are going to be re-proposed this year, along with basic staples of public schools, like kindergarten and transportation.”

Kennedy criticized the lack of leadership in Harrisburg.

“We have a \$9.7 million shortfall here in Upper Darby, thanks to a lack of leadership in Harrisburg,” Kennedy said. “I think that it’s unfortunate that the budget cuts have not been announced already, because it gives the community less time to voice their opinions to their state legislators, but I do not envy the difficult task that the school board and administration have ahead. I’m hopeful that after the struggles of last year, UDSD’s leadership has learned that listening to the ideas of the public is critical to their jobs.

“Last year, SUDA was able to help the community to retrieve \$2.7 million for UDSD, which was almost enough to bring back every great teacher that UDSD students value. We did this just by lobbying a small percentage of the General Assembly. This year, we’re trying something a little different, by enabling any school district in the commonwealth to join us. We hope that by making contact with more, and hopefully all, legislators, we can significantly increase the funding that is restored to Pennsylvania public schools.”

Kennedy invited citizens to get involved by going to the website, to view the video and take the SUDA Pledge at www.standupdemandaction.org.

URL: <http://www.delcotimes.com/articles/2013/04/29/news/doc517dd7a3100ab495335643.prt>

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