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Upper Darby asks residents to weigh in on school budget cuts

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By Rita Giordano, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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The residents came to the meetings by the hundreds, angry that Upper Darby school officials, confronting a \$13 million deficit last year, were proposing drastic measures that included cuts to the district's much-loved art and music programs.

This year, the highly diverse, working-class district, whose taxes are among the highest in the region, is peering deeply into another budget hole - \$9.4 million. But this time around, the district is taking a different tack: The people are being asked what they would cut.

District officials are working with the University of Pennsylvania Project for Civic Engagement in a series of community forums - the first will be Wednesday, Feb. 27 - that will bring the budget dilemma to the residents.

Called "Tight Times, Tough Choices," the program was brought first to the City of Philadelphia by the Penn Project in 2009 when the city was battling a \$257 million deficit. About 1,700 people participated in those workshops. Upper Darby will be the first school district to try the program.

"I think it's going to be a unique way of approaching the budget," said Louis DeVlieger, Upper Darby superintendent of schools.

Last budget season was marked by contentiousness and high emotion as residents came out against proposed painful cuts that included laying off librarians and eliminating elementary arts and music. Even alumna and TV star Tina Fey spoke out against the arts and music cuts. Some librarians were let go, but arts and music stayed.

This year, DeVlieger said he was approached by Penn Project director and cofounder Harris Sokoloff. "He said, 'What if I help you engage the community so they feel like they have a voice?' " DeVlieger said.

The Penn Project has been involved in many issues and employed different tactics over the years, but as in Philadelphia, a process resembling a game will be used in Upper Darby. Participants are provided with budget information, then broken into small groups to work through budget choices to determine how best to close the gap the district is facing, according to Sokoloff.

"The goal is to help the community understand the challenges and have input into whys and the trade-offs" of the budget process, Sokoloff said.

District officials will likely be present to perform the budget briefings and provide information but they will not participate otherwise, he said. "This is not about them," he said. "This is about community members doing the work to inform their officials."

The cost to the district is about \$26,000, \$12,500 of which is being paid for by Comcast and private contributors, DeVlieger said.

Four forums are planned. When they are over, the Penn Project will provide the district with a report of the participants' deliberations and recommendations. District officials are not bound to implement them, but have promised to respond to recommendations and priorities voiced in the report, Sokoloff said.

Participants are being asked to register, but it is not required.

To register go to: <http://tinyurl.com/UD-SchoolBudgetForums>

The sessions are:

Feb. 27, Wednesday, 10 a.m. to noon, Watkins Senior Center, 326

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Watkins Ave., Upper Darby.

March 5, Tuesday, 7 to 9 p.m., Beverly Hills Middle School, 1400 Garrett Road, Upper Darby.

March 10, Sunday, 3 to 5 p.m., Drexel Hill Middle School, 3001 State Road, Drexel Hill.

March 11, Monday, 7 to 9 p.m., Westbrook Park Elementary School, 199 Westbrook Drive, Clifton Heights.

Contact Rita Giordano at 610-313-8232, rgiordano@phillynews.com or on Twitter @ritagiordano.

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