

News

Upper Darby residents scrutinize 2013-14 school budget in new engagement process

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A slight increase in property taxes and a liberal use of the fund balance is what some Upper Darby School District residents think would tighten the district's proposed budget gap.

District residents Wednesday morning got their chance to voice what financial decisions should be made to bridge a \$9.7 million gap in the district's \$169 million preliminary budget for the 2013-2014 school year.

Hosting the forum was Dr. Harris Sokoloff of the Penn Project for Civic Engagement, whose help was enlisted by the district to include more community input during the budget crisis.

"What's unusual is that your board is actually doing something different," Sokoloff said. "Rather than waiting to get public input reactively, they're asking you for your ideas up front."

Community members worked in four groups to go over 37 line items of potential cuts, including districtwide cuts in faculty, and determine how much of a tax increase the district should implement.

A rise in property taxes even by 2.4 percent, an increase of \$79 on average, was deemed gut-wrenching in one group.

"It's inevitable that our property taxes are going to be raised," said Jill Patterson. "So why don't we go with the least if we had to pick?"

The other tax increase options that were proposed to the groups were 4, 6 and 8.4 percent.

The group was in agreement that although taking \$2 million from the district's fund balance, about half of the account, would be a shared pain, using more of that money would offset the tax increase.

While one parent thought \$3 million of the fund balance should be used, it was clear property taxes would have to go up again to replenish district coffers.

What the group thought were adequate tax increases and fund balance usage pales in comparison to the district's preliminary budget.

The preliminary budget that was presented on Jan. 30 shows an 8.7 percent increase in school taxes, which would bring in \$7.2 million. The use of \$2.5 million from the fund balance would fill the void.

While there was deliberation about cutting back on teachers in the schools, it was almost unanimous that an elimination of half-day kindergarten and noontime support in the elementary schools would be bad for the district.

On the staffing side, the group thought a 5 percent decrease in various secretarial and other staff positions was acceptable.

Although group members found a lot of the decisions to be difficult, moderator Gwynne Scheffer noted that this is what the administrators are going through.

“Everything is essential. It is very typical in saying all of this really matters,” Scheffer said.

The choices made by the groups will be compiled into a report and presented to the school board before the budget is to be voted on.

Future community forums will be at 7 p.m. March 5 at Beverly Hills Middle School, 3 p.m. March 10 at Drexel Hill Middle School, and 7 p.m. March 11 at Westbrook Park Elementary School.

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