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Upper Darby school budget based on citizen input

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Rita Giordano, *Inquirer Staff Writer*
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The proposed Upper Darby School District budget that will be unveiled at Tuesday's school board meeting will reflect priorities and cutbacks suggested in community forums conducted this year by the University of Pennsylvania, the district superintendent says.

The forums held by the Penn Project for Civic Engagement sought input on how to deal with a projected \$9.7 million budget deficit. More than 480 residents took part in the four sessions.

The Penn Project issued a report on the forum findings a couple of weeks ago that said residents would reluctantly abide measures such as a tax increase, spending part of a fund balance, and cutting back on administrative and transportation spending.

However, they strongly opposed cuts to arts, music, and sports programs and thought other cuts should spare education as much as possible.

"The goal of the administration . . . is to incorporate the values expressed in the report . . . to help us in the decision-making in this budget cycle," Superintendent Louis DeVlieger said last week. "The public should expect to hear their voice."

The proposed budget was crafted to avoid adversely affecting instruction, DeVlieger said. He did not provide details of the spending plan because of ongoing revisions, but said cuts to art and music were not being proposed "at this time."

Nevertheless, there is bound to be pain with such a deficit. At the Penn forums, residents were unhappy recommending any cuts.

"Every piece of low-hanging fruit is a stretch," said Harris Sokoloff, project director, when the forums' results were released.

And some residents were critical of the forum process, including the budget choices given to participants. Some thought they should have had the option to recommend that the district end its support agreement with Delaware County Community College. Penn Project staff said there would not have been enough time to do that this budget cycle.

Last year, deep proposed cuts to the district's art and music programs to help close a \$13 million deficit drew outrage, with hundreds of residents protesting at heated public meetings. Additional state funds at nearly the last minute spared the programs, but librarians were cut.

The Penn Project approached district officials about conducting the community forums this year. The project held similar forums in 2009, when Philadelphia was facing a massive shortfall in its city budget.

The school board meeting will be at 7:30 p.m. in the Performing Arts Center of Upper Darby High School.

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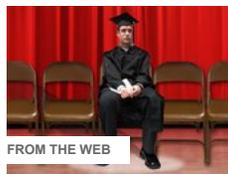
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As University City continues to gentrify and push the ghetto further west, guess where it's all spilling into? Look at the demographic trends and it's easy to see what Upper Darby's future looks like. Hint: West Philly was a nice place to live 50 years ago too

— magicboy2

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