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NEWS



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Niskayuna school board draws from savings to spare staff positions

Decision runs counter to superintendent's advice

Zachary Matson [@zacharydmatson](#) | May 19, 2020



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NISKAYUNA -- The Niskayuna school board on Tuesday night adopted a budget for next school year that spends down over \$4 million in district savings in a bid to save the jobs of teachers, social workers and other staff who work closely with students.

The \$90.8 million spending plan, which the board adopted on a 6-1 vote Tuesday night, bucked the advice of Superintendent Cosimo Tangorra Jr., who for months has cautioned the board against drawing too deeply from savings and setting up deeper financial challenges next year and in subsequent years.



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the support of educators more than ever before as they cope with the social, mental and academic fallout of the pandemic and school closures.

"I think this year more than any other year our kids need the teachers to be there for them when they go back in the fall," board member Jennifer Zhao said during the board's Monday night meeting.

The adopted budget, which will be up for voter approval next month, would increase the local tax levy by 2.15 percent, the district's tax cap, and eliminate 16 staff positions, primarily administrators, clerical assistants, operational staff and teaching positions being vacated by retirements.



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At Monday's meeting, the board and district officials reviewed the line-item budgets of equipment, BOCES and contracts, which make up less than 20 percent of the district's overall budget. While Tuesday's revised budget was presented Monday night...

appropriate more fund balance to fund instructional positions that were eliminated in Tangorra's recommendation.

School districts carry a fund balance on their books that is intended to serve as a funding cushion in case of emergencies. Along with dollars allocated to and restricted in certain reserve funds, the fund balance effectively operates as the district's overall savings accounts. The fund is what has accumulated from leftover money from previous school years. Districts typically appropriate a portion of the fund balance to support the annual budget, but once money is appropriated and spent from the fund balance, the district can only replace it by accumulating leftover money. The "one-time" infusion of dollars essentially means that \$1 million spent out of the fund balance to cover teacher costs next year would not be available to cover the gap the following year.

The budget calls for spending nearly \$4.2 million in fund balance next school year, up from \$1.5 million this year, and would apply \$390,000 in reserves, up from no reserve dollars budgeted this year. The budget also plans for a 10-percent reduction in state aid. While districts expect further cuts to state aid this year, they don't know how deep they will be or whether any of those reductions will be offset by federal funding. So far the Trump administration has been non-committal to proposals to bailout state and local governments.

Tangorra's initial budget presentation on March 9 included appropriating over \$1.5 million in fund balance and reserves. Since then he had increased his proposal to include a total of over \$3.2 million in fund balance. His proposal called for the elimination of around 35 staff positions.

"We are already using more fund balance than is advisable," Tangorra said at Monday's meeting.

The board members, though, asked officials to draw down another \$1 million or so in fund balance to spare 20 instructional positions Tangorra recommended eliminating. The district currently has just over \$8 million in fund balance and reserves. District officials on Monday outlined for the board how if it continued to spend down reserves at a similar rate, it would deplete all of the district's savings by the 2022-2023 school year.

"We know we are putting a band aid on the situation this year," Tangorra said of reducing "one time" spending on materials and equipment to fund the annually recurring costs of a staff position. "I can't be irresponsible and tell you this is going to fix the problem. Next year, it is going to make it worse."

The district's budget process, which started with Tangorra in March projecting staff cuts would be necessary weeks before school buildings closed and the state's finances turned downward, has drawn intense community interest. Hundreds of people have logged on to virtual school board meetings and scores of residents and district employees have submitted public comments, which have been assiduously read aloud by board President Howard Schlossberg at each meeting.

At Monday's meeting alone, Schlossberg read out around three dozen submitted comments, taking up about the first hour of the meeting. The school district counted 368 online viewers for the meeting, according to a district spokesperson. One meeting last week topped 300 viewers; the other meeting topped 400 viewers, according to the district count.

Issues of concern have shifted as word of proposed cuts have spread throughout the community. An earlier proposal to terminate a lease to house a special education program for older students in downtown Schenectady was eventually walked back by district officials. So were cuts to the equivalent of 2.5 elementary school social workers. On Monday, a large number of Glencliff Elementary School parents wrote in to oppose the elimination of one third-grade teacher and one fifth-grade teacher, increasing expected class sizes in those grades above the district guidelines. The third-grade teacher was restored in Tangorra's proposal.

The district is going to need to find a way to translate that interest into support as it looks to get a budget passed in the June 9 absentee-only budget vote. If the budget doesn't pass, there are no rules for holding a second election, as is typical, forcing the prospect of a draconian contingency budget that would lock in the district's current tax levy and limit the types of expenditures the district can make.

Board members also acknowledged the tax levy will have to climb in the coming years as it looks to contend with the financial consequences of relying heavily on fund balance for next school year's budget.

Not all board members agreed with the majority's plan to appropriate a larger share of fund balance. Board member Brian Backus said he was concerned that doing so would dig the district into a financial hole.

"I think we are kicking the can down the road and this is not going to get better in the next year or two," Backus said Tuesday. "I just can't accept that."

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MENU



Current vice president Lillian McCarthy is running for re-election. Candidates Susan Filburn, Matthew Dreher, Rebekah Deuel-Jones, Susan Moore, David Newell and Katie Whittemore also will be on the ballot.

Voters will also decide on two ballot propositions: The first will be whether to approve \$968,000 in school bus replacements, and the second will be approving \$58,795 to be collected for the Ballston Spa Public Library.

The June 9 election will take place by absentee ballots only; voters must return their ballots to the district by June 9 at 5 p.m. The two candidates receiving the most votes will be elected to serve three-year terms on the school board beginning July 1. The candidates will be listed on the ballot alphabetically by last name.

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