

THE ABINGTON JOURNAL

Lackawanna Trail School Board members approve tax hike in proposed budget
by Robert Tomkavage - rtomkavage@timesleader.com Posted May 16, 2018

FACTORYVILLE — Members of the Lackawanna Trail Board of Education voted 5-4 to approve a proposed final budget of \$21,285,785.00 for the 2018-2019 school year.

The proposed budget includes a 3.1 percent tax increase for Lackawanna County residents and a 3.48 percent increase for Wyoming County residents. The proposed millage rates are 167.44 for Lackawanna and 94.80 for Wyoming County. A mill is a \$1 tax on every \$1,000 of assessed property value.

Per Business Manager Keith Glynn, the average increased cost per household from the proposed final budget would be \$60.49 in Lackawanna County and \$67.60 for Wyoming County residents based on average assessed value.

Dr. Michael Mould, Deborah Naylor, Joseph Ross, Philip Stark and David Thorne voted in favor of the budget. Adrian Bianchi, Karl Beichler, Kevin Mulhern and Joseph Strauch voted against it.

“I think there are cuts that can be made in the district, but we can’t do it right now,” Beichler said. “This (teachers’) contract is in effect for the next three years. We can’t keep going the way we are going. Enough is enough. We have to go back to the drawing board, in my books, and straighten this out with the help of the taxpayers. There is no reason why, in the next contract, the teachers and administrators can’t give a little bit.”

Mould sympathizes with the taxpayers, but believes the proposed budget should be approved.

“While there is work to be done, I think the board and our administration have done a great job in bringing costs under control and heading the financial condition of the district in the right direction. My heart goes out to all of you, but this is the best budget we can come up with at this point.”

According to Glynn, there have been “moderate to severe” tax increases each year dating back to the 2010-11 school year.

“The district had a deficit of \$667,000 in 2014-15 and we have turned that around to a \$1.2 million surplus,” Glynn said. “We’re returning to adequate funding levels and that had a tremendous amount to do with our taxpayers. We dug ourselves out of a very significant hole.

“This is a continual effort to try to save taxpayers of the district money while controlling costs, but there is a cap on what we’re able to cut. We may have less kids in our school, but everything we save is being eaten up by cost increases. Yet, we still continue to find a way to balance the budget with minimal increases.”

Per Glynn, the costs of cyber charter school costs have risen from \$284,000 in 2010-11 to to a projected \$772,000 in the upcoming school year. He added that mandated payment to the district’s PSERS retirement system has increased from \$225,000 to \$1.3 million in the same time frame.

The district is also down 21.5 staff positions since the 2015-16 school year, according to Superintendent Matthew Rakauskas.

Susanne Green, of Benton Township, feels another tax increase would be tough for the residents to handle.

“Our citizens cannot afford it,” she said.

Susanne’s husband Steve believes there needs to be more dialogue between citizens of the district and board members.

“I’d like a taxpayer advocacy group to come together and partner with the board in a non-hostile way to try to come up with solutions to correct the problem,” he said. “That’s the only way we’re going to salvage Lackawanna Trail School District.”

Jeremy Choplosky, who owns a property in Nicholson Borough and one in Nicholson Township, voiced his concerns regarding another potential tax hike.

“These taxes are becoming a huge burden on people,” Choplosky said. “I have a farm and my father, who is 67 years old, still works seven days a week trying to make what little money you can in farming just to pay the taxes and insurance. There is no way this can keep going on at the rate it’s going. My property has been in my family since the 1930s and I don’t know if we’re going to be able to keep it.”

In other business, Rakauskas announced the district will implement a three-hour delay schedule next school year.