

Lackawanna Trail School Board hears residents opposed to tax increase

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The Lackawanna Trail School Board got an earful from residents and taxpayers Monday night who don't want to see their school property taxes go up any more in spite of a looming budget crisis.

"When will it end?" Arlene Matthews asked. "Every year you keep raising our taxes and it's just not right. I can barely pay them now."

At the previous week's board work session March 7, Business Manager Keith Glynn said the district had laid out for the public that it wanted to get an exemption from the Pennsylvania Department of Education to raise taxes more than a state-imposed 3 percent, and they could go up next year 6 or 7 percent.

He said Monday he could tell from the PDE website that an exemption had been granted but won't know until sometime in the week ahead how much taxes could be raised.

He noted last week that the school was getting hammered by footing the bill for cyber charter schools and also a dramatically enlarged contribution to the teachers state retirement system.

"Look, I don't want to do many of the things that are on the table" such as raise taxes, freeze employee pay or cut back programs, board President David Thorne said. "But it's Harrisburg that's tying our hands. We're running out of options."

Mr. Thorne spoke of several districts that are in greater financial turmoil than Lackawanna Trail, and he said it's been hard for him to conceive of not opening their doors after May 1.

Matt Baldwin of Dalton asked pointedly, "If the doors do shut down, do you have an exit strategy for this district?"

Superintendent Matt Rakauskas said, "There is no exit strategy. We've made a commitment to getting through."

The school did get a tax anticipation note last fall that has helped enormously when the state budget has been in limbo, Mr. Glynn said, and the district is expecting to pay it all back when revenues come in, but he also noted he wanted to get the ball rolling on a similar tax note for 2016-17, starting July 1, just to be on the safe side.

Also at Monday's meeting, Mr. Rakauskas made a statement to parents who six months ago made a pitch to have varsity soccer offered in the district.

"We just can't do it," Rakauskas said, even if parents ante up the whole bill and create a soccer club.

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