

Prelim Trail budget takes tax hike

BY ROBERT L. BAKER
Wyoming County
Press Examiner

Lackawanna Trail School Board approved a proposed \$20.6 million budget Monday night that will see property taxes jump 9.5 mills in the Lackawanna County area in the district, and 3.2 mills on the Wyoming County side.

That represents a 6.6 percent increase in taxes for Lackawanna County property holders who will likely

be taxed at 146.56 mills, and a 4.2 percent increase for Wyoming County property holders who will likely be taxed at 77.84 mills, when it comes time to vote for the final budget in June.

It had been known that taxes would go up to cover a bond obligation that Trail was taking on to completely repair the roofs of both the elementary center and high school as well as the installation of a security camera system.

Board president David

Thorne had asked former business manager Dave Homish in April, if the bond note would take a one and a half mill tax hike, and Homish had replied it would be more like two mills.

Although approved unanimously by the seven board members present, no one spoke to why the tax hike was greater than previously addressed.

Members Adrian Bianchi and Joseph Ross were not at Monday's meeting.

However, tightness of funds

was on the minds of board members and administration as they took a few actions May 11.

When it came time to vote on the possibility of granting a sabbatical request for Mary DeNault, board member Michael Mould said he was opposed for two reasons: one she wanted to do a sabbatical for the second half of the 2015-16 school year and the first half of the 2016-17 school year. He worried aloud that forcing two classes of impressionable

elementary students to have two different teachers in the same year was difficult.

But he also said he couldn't figure out where the money would come from to facilitate it.

The motion was denied 5-2. Later in the meeting, superintendent Matt Rakauskas, noted that instead of recommending three new textbook series this year, the district could save about \$8,000 if it postponed approval of one of

them. It was voted unanimously that the position of public relations director be eliminated, effective at the end of the 2014-15 school year.

"A small district like Lackawanna Trail no longer has a need for this service, which can be handled by principals, faculty and volunteers," Rakauskas said in a work session May 4. He noted the action would will save approximately \$30,000 per year.

During the May 11 meeting, Rakauskas said the action was financial and not disciplinary.

Nearly all board members present as well as administrators and members of the public heaped praise on present PR director Alice Stuffle whose passion for the school district was extraordinary.

Also, the boys' volleyball team will be officially suspended for the 2015-16 school year. The past few seasons have had a very low number of participants, with only seven team members for a sport that has six players at one time. This action will save the district \$6,000 just in coaches salaries.

If there is greater interest in participation, the sport can be re-activated, Rakauskas said.

The board also approved a final school calendar for 2015-16 which has a student start date of Monday, Aug. 31, preceded by four teacher in-service days, and options on a graduation date of Friday, June 3, and Friday, June 10.

At a board work session, May 4, board members discussed limiting vocational and technical education to serious students only.

According to Superintendent Matthew Rakauskas, a

new policy is "very skeletal at the moment," but the district should focus on sending the most dedicated students to vo-tech programs such as the Susquehanna County Career and Technology Center.

He said that while sending capable students at a cost to the district of \$8,000 per student is practical, he believes some of the students who have been going to vo-tech programs are not

applying themselves, and there are problems with discipline and truancy.

The current vocational education policy is antiquated and in need of an update, he said.

Policy #115 entitled "Career and Technical Education" was recommended for first reading at the May 11, although there were issues raised with specific language. It passed unanimously.

RBC Capital Markets was recommended as investment banker for the 2015 district bond issue, and Community Bank NA was recommended as paying agent for the bond issue, at a cost of \$1,000 per year. Haggarty, Hinton and Cosgrove were recommended as bond counsel at a cost of \$10,000 plus filing expenses.

(Correspondent Pat Farnelli, who attended the May 4 work session, also contributed to this story.)