

Trail votes for \$6M note

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The Lackawanna Trail School Board voted unanimously Monday night to pursue a \$6 million line of credit to tide the district over the next few months, in light of the state budget impasse.

During a roll-call vote to support the measure, four of the eight board members present punctuated their vote by saying "Yes, with regret."

Board President David Thorne made it clear - that in accepting the line of credit offer with First National Bank of Hermitage with a 1.185 percent fixed rate and 1.25 percent combined rate with repayment by June 30, 2016 - "that it will only be drafted, if needed."

Asked if the budget stalemate between Gov. Tom Wolf and the legislature were to go on for weeks or months, how soon would the district need to dip into it, Thorne said it could be needed to make December payroll, just weeks away.

Asked what would happen if the stalemate went to next June, Thorne bluntly stated, "We run out of money, then we're shut down."

The board did okay the payment of bills "found to be true and accurate" to the tune of \$407,539.

It, however, held off the payment of about \$197,000 that is owed to cyber charter schools, reinforcing a recent board vote to hold off on paying these bills until the resolution of the state budget crisis.

That district monies were tight became quite evident during a varsity soccer feasibility discussion on Monday.

About 15 persons were present, most affiliated with the Trail Youth Soccer Association program which had approached the board a month earlier.

High school principal Mark Murphy said he had been charged by Superintendent Matthew Rakauskas, who was not present Monday, to come up with a feasibility analysis about whether adding soccer to the school's menu of fall sports was possible following an Oct. 13 board meeting in which a group of supporters clamored that it was long overdue given the popularity of the 168-player TYSA program.

Murphy said that start-up costs (including equipment, officials, salaries, travel consideration) for the first year would be \$54,159, and a second year that number would drop to \$36,500.

TYSA president Todd Wescott thanked Murphy for his time and effort, but acknowledged the dollar amount "is difficult to understand."

"I can't rationalize those numbers," he said, "but I also can't dispute them at this moment."

Tracy Wescott asked how much of the proposed amount was for salaries, and was told that around \$25,000 was set aside for coaching.

Murphy asked Trail athletic director Harry Powell to spell out the salaries, and he (Powell) said they were derived by having a head coach and asst. coach for boys varsity, a head coach and asst. coach for girls varsity, and separate coaches for junior high boys and junior high girls - six in all - and getting costs following the bargaining agreement that was on the table with other coaches in the district.

Tracy Wescott asked if there were an opportunity to substitute volunteer coaches "so we could derive a figure that we can stomach."

Murphy said that unpaid volunteer coaches would not be allowed under the bargaining agreement.

“Then, I would love as a taxpayer to figure out how we can bring those coaches’ salaries down,” she said.

Thorne polled individual school board members about their sentiments.

Board member Phil Stark said he appreciated the passion exhibited by those present, and “as much as we want to do this, I don’t know how we can add another sport with the way our budget is. If you can find creative ways to finance this, then I think it’s a great idea.”

Board member Joe Strauch said he, too, heard the passion, “and, yes, we are short of money.”

He acknowledged the elimination of a music position nearly killed him.

“If we can’t afford the dinner, I don’t know how we can afford the gravy,” he said.

Board member Michael Mould, who helped introduce men’s soccer to Keystone College 50 years earlier as A.D., said, “This school district respects and honors the contribution that all athletics can make. I would love to expand. Soccer is a wonderful sport.”

“Emotionally, I’m for it,” he said, “but fiscally we’re not anywhere near a position to expand our sports offerings. It’s just not the fiscally responsible thing to do right now.”

“That said, however,” he added, “If someone would endow a soccer program here, then problem solved.”

Board member Kevin Mulhern echoed the others about fiscal responsibility, but noted that time is on their side.

Powell said that if soccer could be added, the district had until the end of the current school year, next May, to let the Lackawanna Interscholastic Athletic Association know its intent.

In other business:

*Policy 808.1 on student meal charging was adopted.

*Joseph Terry was approved for a long-term substitute chemistry/physics position for three months beginning mid December, pending PDE approval of emergency certification.

*Adam Johnson was appointed as junior high wrestling coach at a stipend of \$3350.

*Amanda Yackabowitz was appointed as an assistant girls’ basketball coach at a stipend of \$3900.

*Thomas Ward was appointed as a volunteer boys basketball coach.

*A field trip for 40 science students, as requested by Heather Warriner, to the Body Worlds Exhibit in New York City on April 20 was approved at no cost to the school district.

*Mike Nyland’s request to take a family medical leave of absence for 12 weeks beginning Oct. 26 was approved.

*Six individuals were added to the district substitute lists: Danelle Trexler of Tunkhannock for art; Brienne Barrett of Clarks Green, for early childhood; Joanne Wright of Factoryville, for assistant, secretary, and cafeteria; Marjorie Kauffman of Clarks Summit, for assistant; and Joseph Vernon of Factoryville and Edward Kraft of Hop Bottom, for Nichol’s subs.

District Curriculum Director Tania Stoker shared a Power Point presentation about the School Performance Profile recently released by the state Department of Education.

She noted Trail’s score of 74.3 was up slightly from the year before, and she noted this year’s SPP’s were only available at the high school level.

She said Trail was 11th out of the 22 districts in the Northeast Intermediate Unit and just below Tunkhannock which was at 75.6.

“We’re kind of right in the middle,” she said.

She acknowledged there was a lot to digest in the numbers, and, to a pointed question from Mould about “any weaknesses where we could build,” Stoker said that curriculum was an issue.

“Going from Legacy to Common Core,” she said, “is a 3-5 year process to find out where the gaps are.”

She concluded, “We’re working on them.”