

Trail taxpayers looking for respite

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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 three percent a year index, and they could go up next year 6-7 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 - by formal letter - 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.

Board president David Thorne said, "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.

"But it's Harrisburg that's tying our hands," he said. "We're running out of options."

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 some of them 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 it."

The school did get a tax anticipation note last fall that has helped enormously when the state budget has been in limbo, 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, 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.

Thorne was even more blunt.

"Looking at our budget as I do now," the school board president said, "I wouldn't put up as much as a dime into starting something like that up."

Thorne acknowledged that the district gets its cue from the state, and given its poor track record of late means that one day not far off, the district could be having a discussion about larger class sizes, furloughing teachers, laying off administrators and even closing some sports programs.

"It's where we're at, and I don't like it," he said.

The school board meeting opened Monday night with curriculum director Tania Ross introducing school district winners in the K'Nex Challenge, a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math competition for two grade groupings-fourth and fifth, and sixth through eighth. The district had three teams in each grade grouping with this challenge: Create a structure that must be at least 1 meter tall and your team must be able to demonstrate that your building can hold weight.

The winners will advance to Johnson College on Monday, March 21, to square off against teams from across other districts in the Northeast Intermediate Unit.

In the 4th-5th grade competition, winners on the Empire State Building Team were Annabelle Demora, Jayde Waibel, and Emma Fowler. In second place was the STEM Clock Tower Team of Emily Beeman, Kylie Ward and Madisyn Wilson. In third place was the Octagon Tower Team of Joe Shaw, Jacob Holmes, Austin Fortney and Matthew Rakauskas.

In the 6th-7th-8th grade competition, winners on the Hogwarts Team were Mason Zajac, Owen Lisk, Maria Wetzel and Sofis Flores-Weidner. In second place was the Eiffel Tower Team of Miles Edwards, Kody Cresswell, Abby Fahey and Dariane Jones. In third place was the Plants R Us Team of Maggie Martin, Faith Dewey, Emma Oswald and Katie Carpenter.

In other business: the board

*accepted the 2014-2015 single audit prepared and submitted by Murphy & Dougherty which showed everything in order;

*approved a second reading of a series of policies related to the Division of Federal Program at the State Department of Education;

*approved the retirements of Deborah Naylor (Superintendent's Secretary), Judy Martin (Cafeteria Assistant Manager), and Ann Marie Kalinoski (Cafeteria Assistant Manager);

*approved the following list of substitutes: Keri Benson, school nurse; Stephanie Myers, counselor; and Paul Fetter, Nichols bus driver;

*approved the district paying its portion of the 2016-17 General Operating Budget for Intermediate

Unit 19, of \$21,857.29; and approved a 2016-17 contract for special education services with I.U. 19;

*okayed Mary Belle Gilroy's field trip to the Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, N.Y., on May 11, at no cost to the district;

*okayed Sandy Spott's field trip to Dorney Park as part of the rewards system on either May 26 or 27 at no cost to the district;

*okayed Anthony Dalasio's request to travel to Washington, D.C., to allow his students to participate in the National History Bowl Championship on April 23-24;

*accepted the resignation of Courtney Boslough as Basketball Cheerleading Adviser.

*accepted the resignation of Kelly Hopkins as Color Guard Instructor; and approved an unpaid leave request for her for 2016-17.

In the administrators' reports:

*Superintendent Rakauskas said at the April school board work session he expected to present a 2016-17 calendar opening with three teacher in-service days, followed by students starting on Monday, Aug. 29.

*Elementary Principal Brian Kelly acknowledged the first monthly Children's Produce Market held recently that attracted 81 families. He noted it was open to all families in the district (including high school) and would be held again on April 12, 3:45-6 p.m.

*Asst. High School Principal Brian Kearney spoke about discipline statistics drastically down. He noted a Good Guys Breakfast would be held April 27 at 7 a.m. and will feature 1996 Trail grad Sean Heffron, who is director of Student Life at Sacred Heart University.

*High School Principal Mark Murphy acknowledged Trent Phillips recent performance at the PIAA state wrestling tourney in Hershey. He also noted that faculty member John Brander had commissioned a memorial bench remembering the late track and field coach Mark Petrewski.

*Special education director Stephanie Russell spoke about the complexities of creating IEPs and how they took a team approach.

*Curriculum director Ross noted that Calculus had been accepted as a new Advance Placement offering in the district and would be taught by Stephen Beckish. She also encouraged parents to complete a Title I school-wide survey and noted that PSSAs were coming up next month.

*Business manager Glynn gave a very brief report about the opening of bids for Food Services Management. He noted that just prior to the March 7 meeting, two bids were received: by The Nutrition Group and the Metz Culinary Management Group. He said he and the superintendent would be reviewing the contents of the documents with a recommendation at the April meeting.

Other board member input:

*President Thorne appointed Karl Beichler to the board's Discipline Committee; Joe Strauch to the Wellness Committee; and Phil Stark to the Negotiations Committee; and asked that the Legal Committee meet to review with how to proceed over the solicitor's contact for 2016-17.

*Strauch spoke of attending a PSBA gathering at no cost to the district recently which addressed how Pennsylvania should address the 2015 federal 'Every Student Succeeds Act' which is a revamp of the old 'No Child Left Behind Act.'