

Decision on Montclair's school budget will go down to the wire

staff
photos
by
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Above,
from
left,
Board
of
School



Estimate members Robin Kulwin, David Deutsch, William Hurlock and Robert Jackson chat before the start of Monday night's public hearing on the Montclair School District's proposed \$116 million budget for 2014-2015. Below, Board of School Estimate member Sean Spiller speaks with a resident following the hearing at the George Inness Annex.

With only a week to go before they are scheduled to cast a crucial vote on the Montclair School District's proposed \$116 million budget, members of the Board of School Estimate say they are still weighing whether to approve the controversial spending plan.

Mayor Robert Jackson, who chairs the five-member panel charged with conducting the final review of the district's operating and capital budgets, said he is keeping "an open mind" and has some questions about the 70-page budget before he makes his decision.

"We're still looking at line items, and will be right up to the final meeting next Monday," Jackson told The Montclair Times.

"I'm interested in lowering those class sizes, and I'm very interested in world languages," Jackson said. "But in the economic times in which we sit today, a 4.4 percent increase in anything is a lot."



"We have people in town whose salaries and net income have not gone up," he said. "For some people it might be the tipping point that says: 'I've got to sell my place and move on to something different.'"



Jackson spoke following a nearly three-hour public hearing during which several members of the public urged the board to scrutinize the budget and its 4.41 percent increase in the school portion of the property tax.

First Ward Councilman William Hurlock and 3rd Ward Councilman Sean Spiller, who serve on the board, echoed Jackson's concern.

"There seemed to be quite a few questions about the size of the increase that we didn't hear last time we met," Hurlock said. "That's something that we are obviously sensitive to."

"Fortunately we have a week to go, so we can take another look at things before our April 7 meeting," he said.

Hurlock said the public's reaction to the budget has been evenly divided so far.

"It's been running pretty much 50/50," he said. "Some people are concerned by the increase; others are in favor of the increase."

According to Spiller, his emails on the budget have also been "pretty divided."

"We all got a form letter of support signed by a number of individuals in support of the budget, and we also had a number of people who have concerns reach out to us," he said.

Spiller said he is sensing a growing level of frustration among residents.

"People are saying: 'we don't mind paying more in our taxes,'" he explained. "But they're also saying: 'we have concerns about certain areas that have to be looked at more closely because we really don't like some of these areas of increased spending.'"

If the budget is approved in its current form, a homeowner with an average dwelling assessed at \$505,495, who now pays \$16,670 in total property taxes, can expect to see the property-tax bill increase approximately \$379.12 through a 12-month fiscal year period beginning July 1.

Schools Superintendent Penny MacCormack said the proposed budget will restore world language instruction for its kindergarten-through-5th grade students by including funds for the equivalent of 4.5 new language teachers.

The budget also includes funding for three additional kindergarten teachers and three kindergarten teacher aides. The hiring will permit the district to create new kindergarten classes at Bullock and Nishuane elementary schools and reduce average kindergarten class size district-wide from 24 to 21 students.

The district's proposed \$2.8 million capital budget includes repairs to all of the district's schools, with \$1 million earmarked to upgrade digital technology in several schools.

Board of Education President Robin Kulwin, who also serves on the Board of School Estimate along with Board of Education member David Deutsch, acknowledged that the decision on the budget this year has been complicated by the fact that it increases the school portion of property taxes for the first time in four years.

"That wasn't a factor the past few years," Kulwin said.

Deutsch said the budget process, which began several months ago, will come to an end next week.

"The Board of School Estimate is required to hold three public hearings on the budget and we've had two of them," Deutsch said.

He said the board will meet next Monday, April 7, at 8 p.m., in the George Inness Annex, 141 Park St., for its third and final public hearing on the budget. At that time, the board will also conduct its final budget adoption vote.

During Monday's meeting, the Board of School Estimate listened to more than two hours of comments from the public.

Chris McGoey and other speakers urged the board to "send Trenton a message" by joining other districts in New Jersey in calling on the state Department of Education to reconsider its adoption of the Common Core State Standards and the shift to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing.

Regina Tuma said many residents are concerned that the district's proposed budget contains funding for the implementation of quarterly student assessments and computer upgrades for the upcoming PARCC assessments at the expense of classroom instruction.

Jackson said he allowed the extended period of public comment because "people needed an opportunity to get things off their chests."

"I got the sense that there was good dialogue going on tonight," Jackson said. "There was a lot of good give and take. I do think that Superintendent MacCormack and [District Chief Operating Officer] Brian Fleischer got a chance, in a more comprehensive way, to answer questions. I think that was helpful."

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