

Boone Board considers tax increase

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The Daniel Boone School Board put rumors to rest at its March 14 meeting by stating that it could levy a tax of 2.4 mills (8.5 percent) without voter approval.

The district first needs approval by the Berks County Court of Common Pleas and the state Department of Education (PDE) of its request for three (of 10) Act 1 exceptions.

Superintendent Dr. Gary L. Otto said a tax increase above the district's Act 1 base index of 1.9 percent (.5 mills) is legal if the exceptions are approved.

He said one of those exceptions is tied to previously approved Berks County court-ordered property reassessments in the school district.

The district's March 17 hearing to the Court of Common Pleas sought for approval to raise taxes by .04 mills to recoup some of the revenue it lost through the court-ordered property reassessments. Otto expects to receive a court decision this week.

PDE must approve the other exceptions. Otto said the approved exceptions would allow the district to levy the base index tax of .5 mills, plus another 1.8 mills for a total of 2.3 to 2.4 mills; that would result in tax revenue of \$2.4 million and would reduce the \$5.9 million deficit to \$3.5 million.

The 2.4 millage increase would increase the district's millage rate from 28.42 to 30.82 mills and property taxes in the Daniel Boone School District would increase \$240 for every \$100,000 of assessed property value. A homeowner with a property assessed at \$100,000 would pay \$3,082 in property taxes.

The \$7.3 million deficit is reduced to \$5.9 million with the possibility of additional state basic education subsidy money of \$828,422 and curtailing full day kindergarten to a half day program.

Voters will not have the opportunity to vote on a tax increase; the district has missed the deadline to submit a voter referendum to the county election board.

Board President Andrew Basile said the board has asked all of its 532.5 employees for a voluntary salary and benefit freeze for 2011-12.

The district's 2011-12 preliminary budget includes salaries and benefits of \$34,434,497, which is 64 percent of the budget and includes a professional salary increase of \$1.1 million.

The teacher contract expires in 2015.

"We have a list of things we're considering and we're turning over rocks looking for more, and the board is still deciding," said Basile. "We're still waiting on the contract negotiations, the PDE exceptions, and the curtailments (of elementary band and the middle school World Language Program)."

The board unanimously approved to offer a \$20,000 early retirement incentive to teachers who have more than 25 years of service.

Teachers must submit a letter of interest by March 28.

The Revenue Enhancement Committee will move forward on the "Adopt a Program" and survey the public's interest in participating.

Board member Frank Cerminaro said an information page will be posted on the district's web site to explain the program and that all donations would be tax deductible.

The idea to "Adopt a Program" was introduced last month by Craig Brown, Birdsboro, and Alinda Ferez, Douglassville, who were approved by the board to raise \$425,000 by March 27 to pay the seven teacher salaries required to conduct full day kindergarten.

Brown and Ferez formed the Daniel Boone Public School Initiative and have asked that kindergarten parents pay \$2,000 to fund the full day program.

They told the board March 14 that kindergarten registrations have stalled at 200 students, instead of the 300 anticipated, and that only \$50,000 of the \$425,000 has been raised.

"There are people who may have to quit their jobs because of the half day kindergarten," said Ferez. "Can you call the students and ask the parents what they are planning to do with their students? You have the ability to do that as your job."

Basile said the district would not survey people about their kindergarten plans, but that the board does realize the importance of the decisions they are making.

"I'm sorry, that is very insensitive and I will notify the Department of Education that you guys are not going to do anything," said Ferez.

Although the board did agree to post a link to the Initiative on the district website, Ferez told the board, "Your staff is going to be fired if you don't do your due diligence [by calling parents]. Let it be known that you're not helping your staff out."

In other business:

Board member Walter Sheehan said it is important that school district groups request charter bus bids from the two local bus companies, which have a good safety record of four. He said other bus companies may not have a good safety record.

"The safety rating is available through the state Department of Transportation, and they would have to have a minimum safety record with nothing higher than 10 and at least solicit a bid from our two

to have a minimum safety record with nothing higher than 10 and at least solicit a bid from our two local contractors and put money back into locally owned businesses," said Sheehan.