Budget parameters and priorities, as well as a presentation on the mill levy process, were all part of a recent focused discussion on the status of Holyoke School District's finances.

Much information was shared at the Tuesday, Feb. 10 meeting of the school board.

Contributing to the open discussion were reports from a Feb. 9 budget committee meeting, a work session with financial advisor Josh Magden on the mill levy process and ultimately, homework study assignments for board members.

From the budget committee meeting, Supt. Stephen Bohrer cited the district has always built a budget conservatively to over-predict expenditures and under-predict revenues.

In a close look at current finances, it appears the school year will end with a deficit of approximately $250,000, rather than the budgeted figure of $609,000. This will reduce the carryover to $1.45 million on July 1, 2009.

Providing a 21st Century education headed the list of budget priorities from the committee report. The district will promote small class size, especially in the primary grades.

Two specific areas affected for 2009-10 include art and vocational agriculture, due to the retirement of JR/SR high art teacher Jerry Williamson and resignation of vo-ag teacher Mike Miller.

Damon Struckmeyer attended last Tuesday's board meeting, asking for clarification on what's happening with the ag program.

It is the board's priority to fill the vacant ag position. Supt. Bohrer acknowledged the board has talked and the community has rumored about that position, but in this ag-based community, it is a priority to fill it.

However, it is a budget priority to reduce art from two positions to one and offer art classes only at the secondary school.

Elementary Principal Jennifer Kral said the teachers have talked about what they value and what they can give up. Eliminating art would still stick with what they value.

Kral is looking at alternatives to offer an art experience, but not a formal art class at the elementary school. It wouldn't be built into a regular class, but could possibly be a once a month activity by the secondary art teacher. Or perhaps there's opportunity for partnering with the local Arts Council and other artists, Kral said.

Bohrer appreciates Kral being proactive in seeing what can be done for art, acknowledging not all teachers could teach art in their classroom. Board member Linda Jelden said it could be a good opportunity to think outside the box and come up with ideas.

Board and budget committee member Jeff Tharp said he feels this is a harbinger of things to come. "This is art, what next?"

Fellow board and committee member Dan Kafka said the reality is that with these budget priorities, at the end of 2009-10, the carryover reserves will be down to $1.2 million. "Effectively, that's zero in the checkbook," he added.

Parameters which the budget committee looked at as influences for the 2009-10 budget, center around the declining enrollment, which equates to less state revenue.

The inflation number associated with Amendment 23 is of key importance for budgeting, but will not be known until March.

It appears the funded student count will be down 22 ($160,000) for 2009-10, based on a four-year average. This is more than reduced expenditures and increased revenue from Amendment 23 can offset.

Major increased costs for 2009-10 are not anticipated, but movement on salary scales will cost one to two percent new money, or about $52,000.

A high budget priority is for district personnel and committees to continue to search for savings in expenditures that are as far removed from the classroom as possible.

Kafka acknowledged to the board he entered the Feb. 9 budget committee meeting ready to cut, cut, cut. But administrators reminded him when you cut programs, you cut people.

He pointed out there have been numerous cuts, many of which aren't even seen. He cited a woods program, a professional media person, elementary counselor and 5/7 of a HS science teacher, as only a few.

Magden explains
ballot issue procedures

In a potential look to the future, but certainly not a commitment to head for a mill levy election, the board held a work session prior to the regular board meeting. Presenting information was Josh Magden, a representative with George K. Baum Company.

This company is the leading underwriter of Colorado negotiated primary and secondary education issues.

Magden highlighted his com-pany's work with school districts to organize various types of revenue elections, including mill levy and bond elections.

Due to the economy swing last fall, Magden noted a lot of elections that should have passed, didn't. He added ag-related communities have weathered the storm better than others.

In approaching a community for increased funding, Magden recommended preparing the public with the plan which cites what will be done with the money. He added a good group of volunteers is needed to help promote it.

Defining specific elections, Magden noted a bond election is basically a loan. When it passes, he sells the bonds to interested entities. A mill levy election comes in as cash each year in the form of increased property taxes. He added if a district has capital construction grants hinging on a mill levy, they're easier to pass.

Multiple questions can be included on such ballot issues, giving choices.

Magden said it's important to have a strong community committee sharing ideas, going into the summer. A coherent synopsis of what's needed should be put together.

"You don't want to threaten the public, but they need the facts," Magden added. He suggested listing the needs, noting what's at risk and asking for a solution. "It's not necessarily easy," said Magden of approaching a ballot issue, "but there's a right way to do it."

In board discussion about Mag-den's presentation in the regular meeting, Kafka pointed out there are folks who believe the district has not cut enough.

Believing by June of 2010, the district will be at $1.2 million (termed as the floor) in reserves, Kafka said much will have to be cut or other alternatives found.

"The board needs to consider what our next step is going to be, financially," Kafka added. "Now is the time for us to seriously consider presenting a vision for the community."

Specifically, Kafka said the district needs about three buses, will need to reroof at some point and is behind in technology. "We were wise in fixing that boiler," Kafka added, but he is concerned for continuing to make cuts that will affect education.

On the subject of buses, Supt. Bohrer mentioned a packet members received from transportation supervisor Robert Jacobs. He has unopened bids on his desk, and also has information about leasing buses.

"A school is a reflection of its community and likewise, a community is a reflection of its schools. I don't think people want our school to be less than what it is now," said Kafka.

The state says to expect cuts, and board members agreed the financial picture of Holyoke schools needs a boost, and the public needs to be aware of exactly where the district stands.

Kafka noted he's not advocating a mill levy override, but believes it's time to do something. He noted the reality is the district is headed to larger class sizes and less electives, without a change in the financial picture.

"I'm done cutting. I'm ready for folks to tell me how much more they want to cut," said Kafka.

Board president Kendon Olofson said, "We're at a time in education when we should be talking about adding—not cutting—to make kids successful and be able to compete for jobs. We have to decide if we're going for a mill levy override."

Homework assigned

"I still think the community expects us to examine what's been going on, to consider things not already considered and to get back with them on the findings," said Jelden.

"Maybe it's homework time for the board," said Tharp.

Kris Camblin volunteered to research a four-day week, Tharp will look at athletics, Jelden at transportation, Kafka will seek more information about state revenue potential and Dr. Bohrer will use an email list-serve to find information on costs for contract labor for such services as snow removal.

If other board members want to study or research a potential cost saving idea, Olofson encouraged them to do so.