

School faces another challenging budget year

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Considering reduction in per-pupil revenue for the third year in a row, alongside the rising costs of doing business, the Holyoke School District Re-1J budget year is incredibly challenging, once again.

Such was the message from Supt. Bret Miles as he presented the preliminary budget for 2012-13 at the June 5 meeting of the Board of Education.

Passage of the preliminary budget is scheduled for the June 19 board meeting.

Miles noted the preliminary budget includes \$200,000 of revenue from the reserve. If the entire budget is spent, it would bring the ending fund balance to \$1,248,323 by June 30, 2013.

As a result, Miles emphasized it would be safe to say this is the last year for this strategy. The district will be forced to increase revenue, eliminate programs or start going dangerously below the \$1.2 million reserve target.

No staff reductions are included in the proposed budget for 2012-13. Attrition was utilized to transition a first-grade position into the elementary counselor position, which was identified as a top need.

Personnel expenditures were cited as top priority in the budget parameters set by the board.

Steps, columns and PERA increases were covered by the district for all employees, and \$70,000 of new spending on health insurance was added to the budget in order to keep the increase from impacting the employees as much as possible.

Supt. Miles recommended combining teacher aide 1, 2 and 3 pay columns into one paraprofessional pay column in order to recruit and retain quality paraprofessionals.

Additionally, to recruit experienced staff, Miles recommended a change to allow new employees

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to be compensated for 15 years' experience rather than the current seven years.

A math position for grades 7-12, which had been eliminated during budget reductions for 2010-11, is being restored to allow for more sections of math and to meet the needs of students.

While capital projects are a priority, this portion of the budget has been reduced. Typically, the board has allocated a minimum of \$180,000 for capital projects which include such things as computers, buses, furniture and large building projects and improvements.

The 2011-12 budget reduced the capital projects allocation to \$120,000, but \$16,000 of that was a set-aside amount for an eventual replacement of capital items. This made the total amount spent during the year just \$104,000. The 2012-13 budget includes \$104,000 for capital expenditures and does not include any set-aside for replacement.

Miles pointed out this reduction in capital projects spending comes at a good time considering this summer the school district will benefit from nearly \$3 million of improvements.

A combination of the mill levy override revenue targeting facilities and the two successful BEST grants have provided the opportunity for the district to address many of the critical repairs and improvements outlined in the Facilities Master Plan which was completed in 2010.

Web design and maintenance service for technology is included in mill levy override dollars approved in November of 2010. The rest of the mill levy override money will be spent on building level technology needs and a mobile computer lab.

Miles noted if mill levy revenue comes in higher mid-year or if the student count grows, a second mobile computer lab is a top priority.

Mill levy dollars will be used for some iPads in an attempt to pilot some new technologies and

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see how they may fit into the overall tech plan in the future.

Miles also noted the capital projects budget includes the replacement/upgrade of machines in the high school computer lab.

When per pupil revenue is decreasing in an already stressed budget, Miles noted there's no way to keep cuts from touching the classroom in some way. However, all attempts have been made to minimize the impact. Class sizes are being evaluated at all levels.

The district continues to explore and evaluate innovative approaches to increase revenue in an effort to offset the need for ongoing budget cuts.

Three strategic advantages this district could use to grow its market share of students have been identified by the Standard of Excellence Team.

They include the district having the most opportunities for students in the region, technology is available for students in the region and it's the best school to attend to become English Proficient.

Miles noted the 2012-13 budget addresses these areas by making sure no innovative programs that could attract students were cut, staying on pace with the technology implementation schedule and a large professional development focus on classroom strategies for English Language Learners.

A Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) grant for an all-weather track and an Expelled, At Risk and Suspended Students (EARSS) grant for the alternative school were submitted this year, but were not successful. The GOCO grant will be resubmitted this fall.

In an attempt to capture some students who may be currently using an online school rather than Holyoke School District, the alternative high school will add an online component.

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Miles also pointed out the investment in the district website is intended to increase the satisfaction of parents with improved communication, as well as attract new students.

Supt. Miles said it is important to note that due to the support of the community with a local mill levy override in 2010, the district is in a much better position during this time than it would be without it.

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