

ORANGE SCHOOLS DETAIL CUTBACKS

Orange Supervisors Hear Presentation on Proposed School Budget, Face Some Difficult Choices

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BY ROBIN KNEPPER

Orange County supervisors received the School Board's proposed \$42.9 operating budget Tuesday night and expressed their gratitude for the detailed and comprehensive presentation.

Superintendent Bob Grimesey and Finance Director Barbara Hill had spent two hours providing step-by-step guidance on known and anticipated state funding cuts, 15 percent non-personnel spending cuts throughout the system, and increases in fixed and essential costs.

The worse case to be looked at, according to Grimesey and Hill, could be \$6.5 million in state funding cuts, resulting in 81.5 fewer employees, no new school buses, a 2 percent salary reduction for those employees who still have jobs, and the challenge of finding alternative funding for middle and high school sports.

They asked for \$17.2 million from the county, the same amount contributed for this fiscal year.

Supervisor Zack Burkett led off the response by taking issue with some of the school system's budget numbers.

"For the record, and we want everything on the record," he said, "the statement in the budget that the schools' budget is 34 percent of the county's budget is wrong. In reality, two-thirds of the county's budget is for the schools."

But, as in most things financial, it depends on what you're looking at.

The 34 percent noted in the operating budget does not include debt service, which comes out of county coffers, not the school operating budget.

There will be a \$1.9 million increase in debt service for the county to pay in the next fiscal year due to borrowing to finance construction of the new Locust Grove Middle School.

"That will bring the debt service on the school up to about \$2.5 million," Burkett said after the meeting, "a cost that could result in a tax increase of 20 [percent] to 25 percent."

Board Chairman Lee Frame briefly addressed some "serious problems" in the county's financial situation, noting "big cuts to the constitutional officers and significant cuts in county services."

He added, "We'd like to make up the cuts the state's imposed, but we can't do that."

Yesterday Grimesey responded to the supervisors' caution.

"It's difficult to feel hopeful in this environment," he said. "We respect the supervisors' efforts and consideration."

County Administrator Julie Jordan will present her proposed county budget to the supervisors next Tuesday, and budget work sessions will continue.

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