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East Ramapo ready for final vote on \$196M budget or austerity

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RAMAPO — Voters in East Ramapo on Tuesday will decide, once and for all, the fate of the school district's 2010-11 budget.

Residents either will approve a nearly \$196 million budget proposal or reject the spending plan and force the district to accept an austerity budget, which will result in the Board of Education making millions of dollars of additional budget cuts.

The \$195,994,700 spending proposal, which was approved by the board with only minutes to spare on the state's June 1 deadline, is estimated to increase taxes in the district between 4.09 percent and 7.9 percent, depending upon potential funding that may come to East Ramapo from the state and federal governments.

The proposed budget figure is a 1.42 percent spending increase over the current \$193,256,167 budget.

Though the plan includes funding for a number of extracurricular activities and educational programs that likely would be cut under austerity, it also includes the closure of Hillcrest Elementary School and the elimination of about 125 full-time staff positions, cuts that have been highly unpopular with many district residents.

Also in the budget plan is \$1.1 million in non-mandated busing costs for nonpublic schools. Non-mandated busing has been controversial in the district; many public-school parents have accused the school board, which is composed mainly of Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish members who send their children to private yeshivas, of favoring the private-school community and neglecting the public-school system.

Superintendent of Schools Ira Oustatcher said Friday that if the public rejects the spending plan, the school board will be forced to make nearly \$3 million in additional cuts to reach the \$193,105,573 austerity budget, a \$150,000 decrease from current spending.

Though he said he could not predict what the board would decide to cut from the budget if the \$196 million proposal is rejected, Oustatcher said sports and music programs likely would be cut and possible staffing cuts could lead to increased class sizes.

According to a document available on the East Ramapo website, the annual tax increase for the average homeowner in the district is estimated to be \$473 under the budget proposal if none of the \$10 million in funding requested from the state and federal governments materializes.

If half of the funding is granted, the tax increase would shrink to about \$250.

Under austerity, the tax increase with no government funding would be about \$344 and would shrink to about \$121 if \$5 million in funding is granted.

Oustatcher would not urge residents one way or the other on the budget vote, but did say the estimated \$130 per household difference between the \$196 million spending plan and austerity could have an impact on the education of the district's students.

"It's a world of difference," he said. "It's about rounding out a child's education with sports and activities and music."

Kalman Weber, president of the Southeast Ramapo Taxpayers Association, said he has been campaigning against the budget proposal, citing the poor economy as his main reason. Weber said that increased taxes would make life difficult for many residents who are already struggling .

"The actual fact is that by voting 'yes' on the budget, we are giving the school board permission to raise taxes by 7.9 percent. Nowhere in Rockland has this been done," he said this week.

Peggy Hatton, a public-school parent who has been vocal in her criticism of the school board, said Friday that she does not agree with many of the cuts in the \$196 million budget proposal, but intends to vote for the spending plan.

"It's a devastating budget, but austerity would be even more devastating," she said. "Even with all of the severe cuts to the budget, this budget will at least save sports, summer school, extracurricular activities and the assistant principals."

Additional Facts

Polling places

Polls are open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday. Residents should be aware that their polling station for the school election is not necessarily the same as it is for the general election. Those with questions should see the East Ramapo website at www.eram.k12.ny.us/education/dept/deptinfo.php?sectiondetailid=49257& or call the East Ramapo District Clerk's office at 845-577-6015. Polling will take place at the following:

Lime Kiln Elementary School
Summit Park Elementary School
Ramapo Freshman Center
Ramapo High School
Hillcrest Elementary School
Rockland Community College Annex
Spring Valley High School
Margetts Elementary School
Chestnut Ridge Middle School
Hempstead Elementary School