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Peacham School Board Unanimously OKs Budget

Budget A Slight Decrease From Last Year Despite Small Deficit

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PEACHAM — The Peacham School Board unanimously passed their proposed budget for next school year on Monday evening.

Total expenditures will be \$2,115,711, down \$26,439 from this school year. The tax rate, based around two state-determined numbers, will also see a very slight decrease.

"You delivered us some pretty good news tonight, all said and told," said Mark Clough, School Board chair, who led a discussion through the budget line-by-line.

Last year the rural PreK-6 school passed a 27 percent tax increase mainly due to changes in the aforementioned state-determined numbers: there was a decline in equalized pupils and unfavorable change in the Common Level of Appraisal (CLA), the Caledonian previously reported.

This year, the CLA is changing in favor of the school because properties were sold at a higher price than what they were listed.

"Thank you pandemic for doing this for us, I guess," said Board Member Jessica Philippe. "[The CLA is] what killed us last year."

Last year's Peacham School budget required two meetings and resulted in the cut of one teaching position out of the school's then-eight due to worries about residents not approving the budget. The teacher in the cut position was re-hired when another teacher decided on their own to move later that year.

Board members spent two

dollars needed to send students to other schools.

"There's a lot of gives and takes here," he said.

"I think it's great that we're able to absorb that \$80,000 and not go up at all this year," said Board Member Cornelia Hasenfuss. "That's pretty amazing. We're actually reducing our budget by \$80,000 this year."

Despite Decrease, Board Members Expect Community Pushback

School board members expressed concern that they will hear pushback on even small expenses from taxpayers while applauding the work of school staff.

"I don't think people really comprehend that there's not just a principal sitting in a principal's office and 'oh, it's a small school so they don't have to do much,'" said Philippe. "It's quite the opposite it seems [even in a normal year]."

Mark Tucker, CCSU superintendent, mentioned that Principal Sam McLeod filled in as janitor this year, his first as Peacham's principal.

"That's what happens in a small school," said Tucker.

Peacham budgeted for a part-time nurse during the current school year, but the position has become full-time due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is being funded by the CARES Act.

Small schools such as Peacham struggle with retaining part-time support positions such as a nurse or guidance counselor.

"I cross my fingers and hold my breath every year at contract time that we're not going to lose one of our skilled school nurses to [a facility that can pay more]," said Tucker.

Peacham is a small school.

hours discussing next year's budget and were pleased by the work put into it.

"I was satisfied with the amount of work that [Peacham Principal] Sam McLeod and Michael Concessi put into reducing out expenses, but not affecting the student outcome quality negatively," said Clough on Tuesday. "This is a very fair budget for both the town taxpayers and for operating a high-quality school, especially in light of all the expenses and challenges created by the pandemic."

Concessi, director of finance and operations for the Caledonia Central Supervisory Union (CCSU), which includes Peacham and four other districts, is in his first year with the SU. He noted that Peacham is the only school in CCSU — which consists of five schools — that operates wholly on local taxpayer dollars without state assistance.

FY22 Budget Notes

Peacham is dealing with a small deficit due to a revenue shortfall and an expenditure overage in the 2019-2020 budget year. The revenue shortfall is because the school received a lower Small School Grant than expected, while the overage is due to unexpected expenses.

This is causing a one-time \$80,000 cost in the FY22 budget. Concessi does not expect such overages to happen again.

Concessi said that the main way Peacham is absorbing the deficit is a reduction in tuition

Peacham is a small school, but in contrast to other rural Vermont schools, is increasing in numbers.

Though the current official pupil count is 69, McLeod mentioned that a handful of students have joined the school recently or plan to in the coming month.

"What we can control is providing an amazing educational opportunity and a haven for kids," said McLeod. "Families will continue to come to Peacham for that as one of the main factors."

Peacham School's proposed budget is above the excess spending threshold (EST), a figure introduced in 1997 to try and equalize education funding across the state, the Caledonian previously reported. However, many say the EST now hurts rural districts who spend more per pupil for items such as transportation.

Peacham has been slightly above the threshold for at least the past two years. When spending per equalized pupil rises above the EST, the district must pay two dollars for every dollar they are over.

The budget now passes to the voters.

The school board will meet again for a short time in the coming weeks to finalize the warning for the ballot, which Tucker is working on. A public forum on the warning, which includes the budget, will be held 10 days or less before the election.