

Niagara-Wheatfield BOE gets set for budget vote; outlines graduation plans

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On May 20, the Niagara-Wheatfield Board of Education held its last budget discussions before this week's upcoming public budget hearing and board elections. Amid funding shortfalls from the state, the board is set to propose a \$77,119,627 budget for the 2020-21 fiscal year, a 3.66% increase from last year. Superintendent Daniel Ljiljanich and Assistant Superintendent of Finance and Management Allison Davis outlined strategies the district will use to cover the budget, including a 1.49% increase on the tax levy.

Per the board's budget presentation, the projected \$2.7 million in additions to the budget come primarily from the following areas: salaries and fringe - \$1,807,949; BOCES services - \$515,174; and debt service - \$431,218.

After reviewing expected revenues versus expenditures, the district was left with a gap of \$5,474,432. To cover the gap, Davis explained that (based on figures included with the proposed 1.49% increase on the tax levy) \$800,000 will be used from Greenway Funds while another \$810,000 will be used from capital reserves to purchase buses. An additional \$2,014,432 will be appropriated from either funds remaining from the 2019-20 year, or by pulling from an unappropriated fund balance.

The remaining \$1.8 million will be pulled from offsetting revenue that the district has on hand. According to the budget report, the district has over \$5 million across seven reserve funds. While there was some concern among board members about tapping into the reserves, Davis said she expects to begin refunding those funds this year.

"I am pretty confident that we will have some money left to refund some of the reserves that we budgeted. I don't know how much at this point, but I do feel confident that we will have some money remaining in the budget this year to refund those reserves," she said.

A large portion of the budget setbacks come from a current lack of funding from New York state. Foundation aid to school districts is frozen at 2019-20 levels as the state deals with the financial fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, an executive proposal to increase the community schools set-aside by \$50 million did not make it into the enacted budget.

However, not all of the finance issues from the state are COVID-19 related. One such example includes reimbursement of expenses related to state-supported schools for the blind and deaf. The state used to reimburse 50% of costs the district pays for state-operated schools for the deaf or blind. However, that cost has now

been passed fully on to school districts effective April 1. School districts did not have to bear any of this cost in the past.

After the meeting, Board President Steven Sabo was candid about this kind of decision making from lawmakers down state.

"People ask us all the time, 'Why does the budget increase every year,' and it's things like this. These ideas make sense in somewhere like Long Island where schools are like 97% tax-funded. In Wheatfield it's more around 50%," Sabo said.

Overall, there was confidence moving forward. Ljiljanich went on to thank the BOE budget office for the work it had done to secure the reserve funds as this allowed the board to move ahead with the proposed 1.49% levy increase - by far the lowest of the possible projections.

"We're pretty confident in that number. If we didn't have reserves, if we didn't have money we could appropriate, we would've had to consider one of those higher figures," Ljiljanich said.

The 2020-21 budget hearing will be held Monday, June 1, via video conference on Zoom. The public hearing can be accessed on the Niagara-Wheatfield District Website at www.nwcsd.org, with dial-in questions to 215-3003.

Board elections will take place on Tuesday, June 9, in accordance with Gov. Andrew Cuomo's executive order by absentee ballot. Ev-

ery qualified voter in the district will be mailed an absentee ballot with a postage prepaid return envelope. Completed absentee ballots must be received by the office of the district clerk no later than 5 p.m. June 9.

For more information, visit the district website at www.nwcsd.org or contact the superintendent at 215-3003.

Graduation

The board also detailed some unique plans to ensure graduating high school seniors receive a proper send off this year, albeit in a way that promotes safety. Co-developed by administrators and students, a three-part graduation ceremony is set to take place Saturday, June 20.

The day's festivities begin with a virtual ceremony at 10 a.m. which will include speeches and pictures from students. Afterward, an outdoor campus tour will allow graduates to "walk the stage" and receive their diplomas.

The graduating class will be divided into thirds who will arrive to the campus at specific times, in vehicles where they will circle the high school and middle school campus. In front of the middle school, graduates will then exit the car and will be able to receive their diplomas and pose for pictures.

"They'll go up, in a very social distancing-safe way, and receive their diplomas. Sadly, no hand-

shakes, but certainly to a lot of applause," Ljiljanich said.

Finally, graduates will conclude the day's festivities by taking part in a parade led by community first responders along a designated parade route throughout the town. The day's festivities are also set to be professionally recorded and televised on WNED on June 27.

Speaking on the decision to hold a largely virtual ceremony, Ljiljanich said: "Our district's decision was based on information that we heard from (the Niagara County Health Department) and obviously all the guidance that's coming from the CDC. The idea of putting 2,400 people together and then attempting in any way to control that with social distancing just isn't very real. The greatest risks are with the greatest number of people and the greatest crowds, so we need to make sure that we don't do anything to honor our graduates - who absolutely deserve it - in a way that would compromise public safety and health."

Next Board Meeting

The Niagara-Wheatfield Board of Education meeting to be held on June 1 will begin at 6 p.m. with an anticipated executive session; the public meeting is anticipated to begin at 7 p.m.

Due to COVID-19, the meeting is closed to the public. However, it can be viewed through livestreaming on the district website.



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