

Watchung Board adopts \$12.2 million budget

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STAFF WRITER

WATCHUNG - The Watchung Board of Education unanimously adopted its 2018-2019 school year budget at a total of \$12,250,259 following a public hearing at its Wednesday, April 25, meeting.

Superintendent Barbara Resko and Business Manager Ernest Turner presented the final budget, which features a tax levy increase of about two percent, up by \$440,986 from last year's budget. The total revenue to be collected by taxes in this year's budget is \$11,151,041, up from last year's \$10,673,587.

The average Watchung homeowner, with a home assessed at \$710,718, would pay \$68.51 more in local school taxes, according to Turner. The figure is impacted by the average borough home value rising by \$10,015 from last year.

Enrollment is projected to decline by 22 students, from 707 students enrolled to 685.



MARGO LANGER



BARBARA RESKO

Turner said the district is "fortunate" to receive an increase in state aid, which came in at \$599,058, an increase of approximately \$165,872 from last year's budget.

In terms of capital projects, Turner said the highlights are the replacement of several HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) units across the district - including two that need to be replaced at Valley View School before the start of the 2018-2019 school year.

"We're under the gun for those two HVAC units," said Turner. "We're moving forward very fast on this to make sure we're ready for the cold next school year."

Work is expected to begin in August and finish

in September.

Turner added the largest part of the budget, and the reason for the tax hike, is increases in salaries and benefits, which make up "about 85 percent of your budget," or approximately \$10.4 million.

He noted the budget, like the 2017-2018 school year budget, features a \$0 balance on the debt service line as the district completed payments on bonds for previous capital projects two years ago.

Resko added the budget current staffing levels in the district.

Both Board President Margo Langer and Vice President Tina Kelly thanked Resko, Turner and others for their efforts in the budget process.

"I would like to say thank you to our administration, teachers, community members and fellow board members for all of their hard work in constructing the budget that was unanimously approved last night," Langer said in an email. "We believe that this bud-

get provides an effective and efficient educational program for all of our students despite increased costs in areas such as healthcare, special education, security enhancements, technology and maintenance.

"We believe this budget will allow us to maintain the finest possible teaching staff, which is of paramount importance for our students. We very much appreciate the community's continued support of the district."

Involving the Public

During the public hearing, Johnston Drive resident Dorie Harvey raised concerns about the timeline of the budget process.

She said she understands that by law the board and administration have a very short period of time to compile the budget and make adjustments, however, she believes the board should have presented the details of the budget when

"In my opinion I feel like there could have been a timeline where you did

this a little earlier and to listen to the comments from the public," said Harvey. "I've been here every board meeting and I don't understand why we don't schedule this at an earlier date and then you guys can vote on it at another board meeting. That way you can actually listen to the comments from the public, so you can maybe have the option to change something, even if it's one dollar."

"I've said this many times that I think it would involve the community a little bit more. I feel bad that there's hardly anyone else here other than me all the time. That's something that I think we should address and I keep asking for it over and over - to maybe present this at a previous board meeting and then vote on it at the next board meeting."

Turner responded the administration has a "very narrow window" in order to complete the budget. He said the entire district wishes it had more time to present and complete the budget, but

the district has to adhere to county and state timelines.

Langer said she feels the board gave the public several opportunities to comment.

"I feel like we have a very open process," she said. "We've had an opportunity for people to speak about the budget at probably the last eight or nine meetings. We have a budget suggestion box for people to share their comments with us; we have information about certain parts of the budget at various meetings."

"I personally think that we really look to involve the community as much as we can, but the budget timeline is very condensed so it's difficult to say we have a final budget because we really don't until it comes to this final meeting."

Harvey said she appreciates the hard work involved, but she still believes the figures can be presented earlier to allow for comment "before the decision has already been made."