

Owego Apalachin

BUDGET VOTE 2009-10

Election Day is Tuesday, May 19

OA BOE approves budget

Tax levy increase held to 1.4%; spending increase limited to 1.68%

The Owego Apalachin Board of Education has approved the 2009-2010 budget it will send to the district's voters on May 19.

"It's been a difficult budget process," said Dr. Bill Russell, OA superintendent of schools, "given the deepening economic crisis and the resulting uncertainties about state school aid.

"We set out to keep both our increase in expenditures and any corresponding tax levy increase very low," he said. "At the same time, we wanted to avoid severe cuts in programs and staff, and we always try to improve the quality of our offerings to the children in our district."

State Aid Uncertainties

The initial education budget proposal from New York Governor David Paterson held the basic "foundation aid" flat, at the same amount as in the current year, but then proposed to cut more than \$1 million in "deficit reduction" funds from the district's state aid package.

"If those cuts had been sustained," Russell said, "we would have had to make drastic cuts in our programs, probably resulting in layoffs."

Fortunately, the federal stimulus funds (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009) were allocated by the state to restore the governor's proposed deficit reduction cuts.

"Our budget this year would have been very different if not for those federal funds," Russell said.

Managing A Tight Budget

Owego Apalachin budget managers built the 2009-2010 budget to minimize year-to-year budget increases.

"Nearly 60 percent of our budget lines were cut or held flat for next year," Russell said.

"While trying to sustain



our commitment to quality programs and services, we trimmed everywhere we could."

That's not an easy task, Russell said.

"It's not easy because many of our costs already require increases in the short-term that are beyond our control," he said.

"Salaries and benefits (e.g., health and dental insurance, retirement, social security, workmen's compensation, unemployment) comprise more than 70 percent of our budget, and they are set by either long-term collective bargaining agreements, or by state and federal agencies."

Fuel, utilities, and materials costs have also been very unpredictable over the past year.

"In the face of some significantly increased costs in key areas of the budget, our administrative team did an excellent job of holding the budget increase to 1.68 percent," said David Barton, president of the OA Board of Education. "The board was very pleased with their effort."

Long-Term Strategies

In part, this year's budget deliberations were part of a long-term budget strategy the board and superintendent adopted two years ago.

"We set out to keep taxes and expenditures low, stable and predictable," Russell said. "We have taken every opportunity to reduce long-term expenditures – for example, paying off debt."

Recent collective bargaining agreements have also seen employees gradually taking on a larger share of health insurance costs, which lowers the health benefit cost to the district.

"We also committed ourselves to gradually drawing down our reserves and our appropriated fund balance to keep taxes down," said Randy Pryor, the district's business official. "These two strategies alone will reduce taxes next year by more than 3 percent."

Maintaining Quality Programs

"Of course, our primary

commitment is to deliver excellent programs and services to our students," Dr. Russell emphasized.

"Our student performance is improving steadily each year, and we are consistently one of the highest-performing districts in the region.

"We are attracting outstanding teachers who recognize that OA is an excellent place to teach and work, with a very supportive community," he said.

"Our budget is designed to maintain that commitment to the quality that our community expects in their schools."

This is not just a status quo budget, however. The coming school year will see the introduction of two new programs that should prove very popular.

"We'll be installing *Rosetta Stone*, the powerful foreign language learning software, on every computer in both of our elementary schools," noted Bernie Dolan, the associate superintendent who is responsible for curriculum and instruction in the district.

"Our elementary language program, which we had

to discontinue a few years ago, was very popular with students and parents," Dolan said. "This new software will allow us to gradually re-introduce Spanish language learning to our younger children."

At the high school, the district will introduce several new technology certification courses.

"We're going to establish a Cisco Academy," said Bob Farrell, OA chief information officer.

"Students will receive training at various levels, from microcomputer specialist all the way up to a full-blown network specialist. They'll leave the program as certified Cisco and Microsoft specialists, with training and credentials to immediately gain entry to good-paying jobs in the IT industry.

"If students want to begin work right away, this training will lay an outstanding foundation," he said. "And for those going on to college, it will be a strong basis for subsequent work in engineering, computer science, and any technology-related career.

"Our technology and business teachers are very enthusiastic about it, and we're certain students will share in that excitement."

Vote On May 19

As always, Owego Apalachin voters will have a chance to vote on the school district's proposed budget. Polling places at the two elementary schools will be open from noon until 9 p.m.

"We certainly want to encourage all of our registered voters to vote on the school budget," said Russell.

"It's our one way of knowing, each year, whether our community thinks we've done a responsible job of budget management and development, and whether they approve of the direction and quality of our schools."