

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Detailed budgets should be published

Tonight, the Pottstown School Board will get a look at the tentative 2011-2012 budget.

In January, the board passed a preliminary budget that would require a 5.5 percent tax increase. (My school board colleagues Valerie Harris and Nat White joined me in voting no.)

However, board members were told by our business manager, Linda Adams, that we really won't be asked to raise taxes 5.5 percent — we were just keeping our options open.

In April, the board learned we will receive \$3.1 million less in state funding next year than we received this year. Our school administrators then proposed enough cuts to compensate for the loss of funding.

Among the cuts are reducing the time allocated to art, music, library, and physical education at the elementary and middle school level by about a third.

Reed Lindley, our superintendent, said the current proposals are "just one way to get to the bottom line. You can put a list like this together any which way, there are many ways to get to the bottom line."

However, we cannot explore any other options unless we know where the money is going now.

Without a detailed budget, we are completely reliant on the recommendations of the school district administration. While many of my colleagues believe we should always be guided by the administration, I believe we have a responsibility to make informed, independent judgments.

Last year at this time, we received a line item budget from Mrs. Adams for the 2010-2011 school year.

Although the line item budget is detailed, it is like a box of jigsaw puzzle pieces: The information is there, but none of it is assembled in a way that makes sense.

I subsequently spent many hours with a helper retyping all the information in a more comprehensible Excel spreadsheet format, which can be found at our website, www.pottstowncitizens.org, in two places:

For personnel costs, go to Pottstown School District → Personnel/Wages. For other expenses, click on Pottstown School District → Budget.

I hope to get a 2011-2012 line item budget at tonight's meeting, and I will retype it into an Excel format and post it as soon as I can.

However, even this accounting is not nearly as useful as it could be.

Properly formatted, a budget can illuminate government services better than any other resource. To do that, however, a budget can't consist solely of numbers. It must contain a narrative that explains the numbers.

For example, the proposed new budget will reduce pupil services by the equivalent of 3.2 full time positions. What are the services provided? What are the positions eliminated? The budget doesn't tell us.

The proposed budget will lay off four special education classroom assistants and reduce all other special education classroom assistants a minimum of one hour per day, eliminating the equivalent 17.2 full-time positions. But how many special education assistants do we have now, and where are they assigned? The budget doesn't tell us.

The budget also proposes eliminating five EAP classroom assistants. There is no explanation of what distinguishes an EAP classroom assistant from any other classroom assistant.

If we want taxpayers to have confidence in our schools, we need to provide them with complete, reader-friendly budgets that show us all where the money goes.

Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not the board's.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Summary

- **At present, the Pottstown School Board is unable to make independent judgments on spending because only our administrators know where the money goes.**
- **The school district should publish a clear, comprehensive budget so everyone can see how taxpayer dollars are spent.**
- **The budget should go well beyond numbers. It should contain a narrative that explains the numbers.**