

2.5% LI SCHOOL TAX HIKE

Total proposed levy is more than \$8.85B: report

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The proposed tax-levy increase for Long Island's public school districts is 2.5 percent for 2019-20, according to an analysis released Wednesday by the state Association of School Business Officials.

Statewide, districts are expected to increase property taxes by 2.6 percent, said the report, which was based on estimates that all school systems were required to make to the state comptroller's office by March 1.

The total proposed tax levy for the 124 systems across Nassau and Suffolk counties is more than \$8.85 billion, up from about \$8.6 billion in the current school year, according to the analysis.

Nearly all of the roughly 700 school districts statewide expect proposed spending plans to stay within their local tax cap, the report said, with only 13 indicating they plan to ask voters to approve overrides. The vote on budgets and school board candidates is May 21.

"These are tentative numbers and if the state fails to come through with sufficient state aid, you will see a change for the worst in school district budgets, with more districts proposing painful cuts that impact students," Michael J. Borges, the association's executive director, said in a statement.

A month ago, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli announced that state income-tax revenues were down \$2.8 billion. Cuomo said the drop was forcing reconsideration of spending proposed in his 2019-20 executive budget on schools, health care and repairs to roads and bridges.

Budget negotiations in Albany are underway, with the April 1 deadline looming.

In coming days, DiNapoli's office is expected to release com-



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prehensive figures, by district, on estimated 2019-20 tax levies and which districts plan to attempt to pierce their tax cap. Those projected levy figures, as always, will be subject to revision depending upon the amount of state financial aid that districts receive when the legislature approves the state budget.

Comptroller sets tax cap

The property tax cap, signed into law in 2011, limits the amount that districts can raise through property taxation to 2 percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower. The baseline cap is set annually by the comptroller's office, and is 2 percent for the 2019-20 school year.

A district's tax-cap limit can be higher, equal to or lower than the baseline cap, depending upon allowed exemptions such as voter-approved borrowing for construction projects. Proposed budgets that exceed a district's cap limit must win a supermajority vote of at least 60 percent, rather than a simple majority.

The Eastport-South Manor district is the only one on Long

Island that indicated it may seek to pierce its tax cap, the analysis said. The figures the district submitted to the state showed a proposed increase of nearly 4 percent, above a maximum allowable increase of 2.7 percent.

District officials said Wednesday they are in the midst of the budget process, and the spending plan under discussion would keep the system within its cap. However, an expected ballot proposition seeking approval of \$677,000 to place armed guards at all five of its school buildings — a safety measure already taken by several districts on the Island — would push the district past its cap limit.

"We have crafted a balanced budget for the 2019-2020 school year that meets our changing needs," Superintendent Patrick Brimstein said in a statement. "It's a budget that marries our expenditures with our available revenues. At the same time we recognize there may be a desire in the community to place armed security guards on each campus."

The analysis groups school districts into nine regions

statewide. The expected levy increase on the Island was at the midpoint of those for the nine areas. Systems in the Finger Lakes region showed the highest proposed increase, at 2.9 percent, and those in the North Country region the smallest, at 2.2 percent.

The report released Wednesday does not include the "Big 5" — school systems in New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers. The cap does not apply to the New York City system, and the other four comply as part of their respective city tax caps.

\$277B proposed for aid

Cuomo's budget proposal, released in January, included \$277 billion in school aid, an additional \$1 billion that represents a 3.6 percent increase. The state Board of Regents in December had called for a \$2.1 billion increase in school aid.

Operating aid to districts in Nassau and Suffolk counties under the governor's spending plan would increase by \$59.17 million, or 2.03 percent, to a total \$2.97 billion, according to Newsday's calculations. Those figures did not include money

for building aid, which varies by district, or funds allocated to districts for schools that are required to provide certain community services.

On Long Island, school taxes are a hot-button issue, as they account for about two-thirds of property owners' tax bills.

Districts must finalize their proposed budgets and submit a "Property Tax Report Card" to the state near the end of April. School boards must hold a public hearing on their spending plan seven to 14 days before the budget vote.

The number of districts that have tried to override the cap since its creation has lessened, largely because of the difficulty in getting a supermajority vote. If a district fails to gain that 60 percent approval, officials can choose to put the same cap-piercing budget before voters again in June. If it is defeated at that time, the district must enact a contingency budget, with no tax increase.

A district also may submit a revised budget that falls within its cap limit for the June revote, or it can forgo a revote and adopt a contingency spending plan.