

A fix for district finances

■ **Eastport-South Manor schools face \$3.2M deficit**

■ **Remedy could involve job cuts, piercing tax cap**

BY SCOTT EIDLER
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Officials in the Eastport-South Manor school district, faced with a \$3.2 million operating deficit for the next academic year, outlined a plan to fix the district's finances that could involve staff and spending cuts and piercing the tax cap in 2019.

Last month, the New York State Comptroller's Office designated the 3,300-student district as having the highest fiscal stress score among schools in Nassau

and Suffolk counties.

District officials presented a three-year plan at a Wednesday night community budget workshop, in an effort to hear residents' views on potential cuts and explain how the district became entangled in financial disarray.

"We're on this ship together," Superintendent Patrick Brimstein, who started with the district in May 2017, said. "There's no doubt about it — we're heading into a storm."

Residents posed questions about the extent of the cuts to Brimstein and Timothy Laube, who has been the district's assistant superintendent for business since July.

"It's hurting our community terribly," Adam Tesoro, 51, who has three children attending district schools, told administra-

tors at the forum. "Who's accountable?"

The district's reserves dropped from \$20.7 million in the 2010-11 school year to \$4.2 million in the 2016-17 school year, leading Standard & Poor's to downgrade the district's credit rating from AA+ to AA-, officials said. They did not have details on the number of potential layoffs.

"We're going to lose people," Brimstein said.

The district posted a survey to its website asking residents to rank spending categories pertinent to the 2018-19 budget.

The 15 categories include athletics, school maintenance, administration, transportation, and security personnel.

Regina Fortuna, 44, a parent of two special needs boys in the district's autism program, said she

worried about a potential impact to her sons' learning environments. Her children "need life skills" and "need to function in a classroom" to become independent adults, she said.

"I think that they really need to cut the least amount," she said.

The community forum and surveys were a "good step in the right direction," Fortuna said.

District officials discussed renting vacant classroom space and selling off a building, even installing solar cartops in parking lots that businesses can rent.

Next year's projected \$3.2 million deficit is likely to be higher after further review, officials said.

Laube acknowledged that a key component of the plan, piercing the cap in 2019, is not assured. "It's up to the commu-

nity at the end of the day," he said, acknowledging other districts in which voters rejected attempts to pierce the cap.

Last month, the New York State Comptroller's Office designated the Suffolk county school system as having "moderate" fiscal strain.

The comptroller's offices calculates a district's stress score with financial indicators such as on-hand cash, year-end fund balance levels, operating deficit patterns, and short-term borrowing reliance. The worst designation of financial strain is "significant," followed by "moderate," then "susceptible to fiscal stress."

Three other Long Island school districts — North Bellmore, Long Beach and Wyandanch — were designated as "susceptible to fiscal stress."

Residents reject proposal for LI's most expensive library

BY DEON J. HAMPTON
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The proposal to build what has been called Long Island's most expensive library was soundly rejected Wednesday night.

Residents, in a 2,396-1,580 vote, decided against constructing a new, 50,000-square-foot facility for the Mastic-Moriches-Shirley library.

Moments after the tally was announced, library board president James Mazzarella said: "The board is certainly disappointed for our entire community that the vote on the bond for a new library was not successful. There are issues that must be addressed at our current facility. We will continue working with our community to achieve our goal of solving the infrastructure challenges we face."

The \$33.5 million bond referendum, in addition to \$5 million in cash reserves, would have paid for the energy-efficient building, which would have been built one mile south on the former Links golf course.

Bond opponents preferred keeping a new library closer to the existing location, either through renovation or building a new facility at a vacant bowling alley next to the current li-



Artist's rendering of the new Mastic-Moriches-Shirley library. A proposed \$33.5 million bond would have made it the Island's costliest library.

brary. "It's way over cost. I don't know why we need it. It's something other than a library," said Shirley resident Frank Magdits, 54, who voted against the project. "It's a waste of money."

The proposed library wasn't without its supporters.

"The current library is good but the new place is better and had much better parking," said Kathy O'Donnell, 54, of Shirley,

who voted in favor of the library.

She added, she didn't mind the increased taxes. "They're going up anyway, might as well get something good out of it," O'Donnell said.

The average homeowner would have paid an extra \$144 per year in property taxes. Interest from the bond would have been about \$1.9 million annually, or about \$57 million over the 30-year life of the bond.

Increased taxes weren't a big concern for many.

"My wife and I have a daughter. It's a place we can take her and utilize the activities," said Jason Linnick, 30, of Mastic. John Sicignano, president of the Mastic Park Civic Association, filed a petition with the New York State Department of Education last month to cancel the referendum. He was represented by Ray Keenen, a

Shirley-based attorney and president of the Manor Park Civic Association. The action was denied last week.

Keenan called the final vote an "overwhelming rejection of this costly proposal."

The proposal was the result of a series of meetings starting in 2015 in which the majority of the roughly 100 residents who participated supported a new facility.