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Inside ExploreLI

TOP STORIES

TAXES ON

Spending at local schools to increase 2.5% to \$13.1 billion

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
 AND MICHAEL R. EBERT

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Total school taxation across Long Island will bump up to nearly \$9 billion in the coming school year, while the increase in district spending slows, according to state figures released Tuesday that track public education funding regionally and statewide.

School tax collections in the Nassau-Suffolk region are projected to rise an average 2.48 percent for the 2019-20 academic year to a total \$8.9 billion, up slightly from this year's 2.37 percent average increase. School expenditures will climb 2.5 percent on average to \$13.1 billion — less than this year's 2.85 percent.

Tax and spending figures were calculated by Newsday both regionally and by district, drawing on Property Tax Report Cards released by the state Education Department. The data cover 121 school systems in Nassau and Suffolk counties, excluding only the tiny East End districts of New Suffolk, Sagaponack and Wainscott.

Voting on proposed school budgets is scheduled for May 21, with district officials waiting anxiously to see if polling patterns are affected by changes in rules from Washington limiting the amount of property taxes homeowners can deduct from their federal income tax. Islandwide, school taxes account for more than 60 percent of total property-tax bills.

Since the state imposed cap restrictions on tax-levy hikes in 2012-13, more than 90 percent of local district budgets have won voter approval annually. The state's cap law sets a baseline limit on annual increases of 2 percent or the inflation rate, whichever is lower.

This year's baseline is 2 percent statewide. Each district's tax-levy limit varies, however,

depending upon exceptions allowed by the law, such as school-construction spending approved by local voters.

Many school leaders, despite recent successes in winning budget approvals, said that new U.S. tax policies raise questions about the current mood of taxpayers. The overhaul in tax law, signed by President Donald Trump last year, limits to \$10,000 the amount of state and local taxes, known as SALT, that can be deducted from federal taxes.

"We're very mindful of the effect of reduced SALT deductions on our citizens," Lorna Lewis, superintendent of Plainview-Old Bethpage schools, said in a phone interview Tuesday. "We're not sure how that will impact their ability to pay long term, so we've been particularly careful in our spending plans and how they affected taxes. And I would assume my fellow superintendents are in the same frame of mind."

Lewis also serves as president of the New York State Council of School Superintendents.

Joseph Dragone, a veteran school business official who conducts annual surveys of tax-and-spending plans on the Island, said he is particularly concerned about the timing of school budget votes.

"Tax returns were due April 15, and the budget vote is only about four weeks later," said Dragone, who serves as Roslyn's assistant superintendent for business and administration. "So those people who did not get a refund this year, or got a smaller refund, or had to pay more money, will be stinging from that. I just hope they remember that school districts are not responsible, and that school district budgets are increasing spending at roughly the rate of inflation."

At the state level, Michael Borges, executive director of the Association of School Business Officials of New York, said



HOWARD SIMMONS

Anoop Keswani, with the East Meadow school district, says about once a week a driver illegally passes his stopped bus.

Deal in Albany to add cameras to school buses

BY YANCEY ROY

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ALBANY — School buses could be equipped with cameras to snag drivers who illegally pass buses that are stopped while unloading or loading students, under a deal state legislators reached on Tuesday.

Lawmakers said the bill, likely to be approved next week, would allow municipalities and school districts to "opt in" to the program. Cameras could be placed on the "stop" sign arm that a bus swings out upon slowing to a halt, or another spot on the bus. Videos of offending drivers would be sent to law enforcement.

The fine for a first offense would be \$250, according to State Sen. Timothy M. Kennedy (D-Buffalo), chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee. School districts would share the fines with the manufacturer until the camera equipment is paid for, then would pocket any excess fines. The ticket would not carry any "points" on a driver's license, he said. As with "red light" cameras, the ticket would be issued to the owner of the vehicle.

"It ensures that our children will be protected from drivers who totally disregard the law, ignore the stop signs, ignore the flashing lights, ignore the crossing arm and just drive through

it," Kennedy said. He said people ignore bus stop signs because of a lack of enforcement — tickets could be issued only if a police officer witnessed an offense.

"But that changes with this legislation," Kennedy said, adding that about 15 other states already have a similar type of program.

Assembly Transportation Committee Chairman William B. Magnarelli (D-Syracuse) confirmed the houses have reached a deal and plan to vote on the bill as early as next week. In a memo filed with the bill, Magnarelli said estimates on the number of drivers ignoring stop signs and passing buses "continues to be alarming."

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who has backed the proposal in the past, said he will sign it into law after the Legislature acts. "I commend the Legislature for reaching an agreement on this critical issue and I look forward to seeing it passed and to signing it into law," the governor said in a statement.

Kennedy said the law would be effective within 30 days of the governor's signature. There would be a lag period, however, before the first cameras appear because municipalities and schools would need time to decide on participation and then to install the cameras.