

LI DISTRICT EYES BUS CUTS

Wyandanch weighs \$1M in transport reductions as it faces \$3.7M deficit

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Beleagued Wyandanch school leaders are calling for a \$1 million-plus cut in bus transportation amid efforts to avoid what state auditors warn is the risk of a \$3.7 million budget deficit, a hefty tax hike for property owners or painful slashes in other student programs.

A scathing new state financial report — the second issued by the state comptroller's office in the past eight months — faults district officials for unrealistic budgeting and failure to close a growing gap during the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years.

The auditors concluded that the Wyandanch district faces two distasteful choices for 2019-20: Either deep cuts in next year's student services and programs such as busing and sports, or a tax increase so high it would bust the state's tax-cap restrictions.

Interviews with residents last week indicated that either choice faces dubious prospects at the polls in May, when voters consider both the district's proposed budget and a proposition that would reduce busing. Any effort to override state cap restrictions would require a 60 percent supermajority vote.

The seriousness of the situation was underlined late last week when Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli, the state's chief fiscal watchdog, issued a statement urging Wyandanch school leaders to fix a flawed budget plan quickly.

"My office found that the estimated revenues in the proposed 2019-20 budget and property tax levy presented by the school district are not enough to finance the \$78.2 million in expenditures," DiNapoli declared. "At this point, it is imperative that district leaders come up with a comprehensive plan and pay careful attention to state aid estimates and other guidance, and make the appropriate changes."

Some community residents, incensed by the district's widening

fiscal crisis, are urging a big turnout at the board meeting on Wednesday. Administrators are scheduled to provide details of a \$70 million-plus budget proposal for the coming school year. The public meeting starts at 7 p.m. at the system's Central Administration Building.

Wyandanch is the poorest school district in Suffolk County, with taxable income and property wealth barely one-third of the state average. Ninety-five percent of its 2,700 students are counted by the state as economically disadvantaged.

Long Island this school year has witnessed protest rallies by poorer districts such as Wyandanch, Brentwood and Hempstead, all pressing for a larger share of state financial "foundation" aid. Wyandanch continues to argue that it is short-changed.

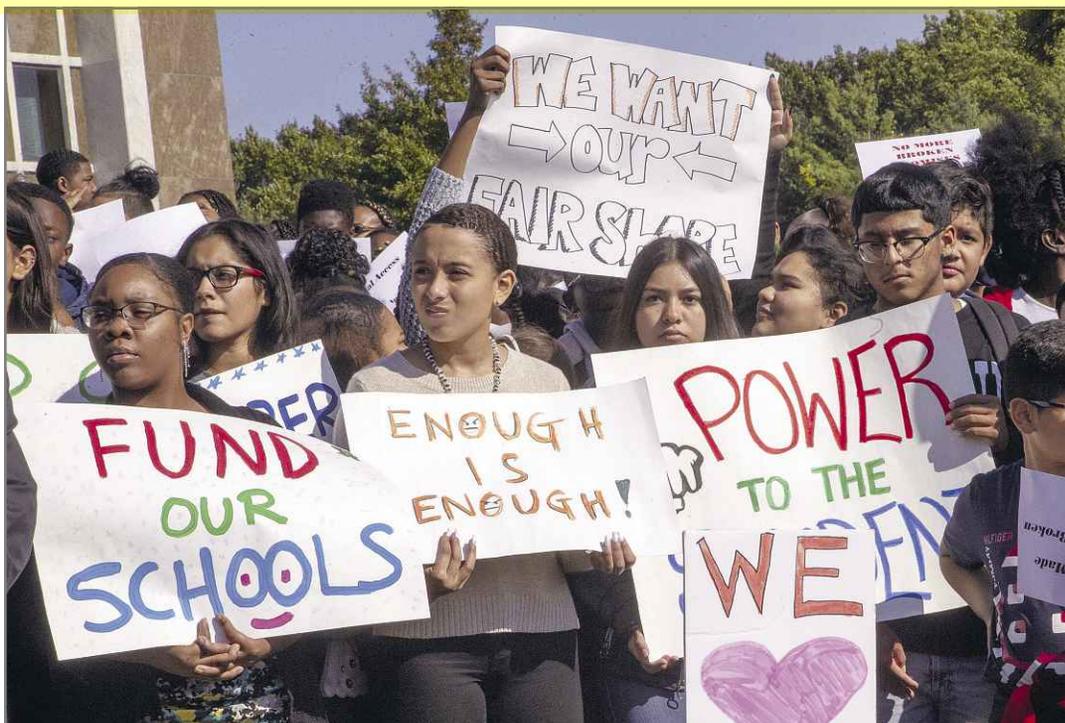
Residents said they can ill afford a big tax increase, even as district administrators insist they are trying to avoid that.

"We think we're overtaxed already, and we don't have anything to show for it," said Alicia Portwine, president of the district's PTA council and a parent of two students. "So why should we give them more money to mismanage?"

Mary Jones, Wyandanch's superintendent since 2014, acknowledged that proposed economy moves would be painful, but added the district's prime goal is to avoid having larger class sizes or make other changes that would directly harm academic offerings.

The district is weighing the possibility of replacing its own security guards with contracted services, to save money on benefits, as well as reductions in student transportation costs. Administrators caution that even if busing and security costs are reduced, they will have to eliminate additional millions in spending to balance the budget.

"We have looked at every possible option to avoid layoffs and other cuts that would hurt the district," Jones said in a pre-



Representatives for Wyandanch and other local school districts rally for more state financial aid last fall.

Budgets and the bottom line

Here are the Wyandanch school district's budgets and surpluses or deficits in recent years. The district figure for the current year's deficit was slightly larger than that supplied by the state comptroller's office. Figures reflect rounding.

YEAR	BUDGET	SURPLUS
2015-16	\$62.68 million	\$515,369
2016-17	\$65.16 million	\$2.02 million
YEAR	BUDGET	DEFICIT
2017-18	\$66.34 million	\$3.54 million
2018-19	\$69.13 million	\$3.97 million

Source: Wyandanch school district

pared statement. "And painful as it is, we realize that cuts have to be made."

One proposal that has parents alarmed would cut bus transportation — now available to all district students — back to the bare minimums required by the state. Current law mandates rides only for elementary students living at least two miles from their school and for secondary students living at



Wyandanch district financial administrator Idowu Ogundipe

"goes back to not wanting to affect the classroom directly."

Neither Jones nor the district's business official, Idowu Ogundipe, would discuss how many students might lose bus rides under their plans. But a look at the numbers indicates that losses would almost certainly be in the hundreds, and very possibly over 1,000.

Wyandanch spent a total \$3.4 million on transportation in 2016-17, the most recent year for which state records are available. District officials said last week that the busing proposition would save the system as much as \$1.6 million, equivalent to 47 percent of the 2016-17 transportation budget.

Residents said any such move could endanger students on foot who would be forced to cross railroad tracks that bisect Wyandanch from east to west or to walk along busy Straight Path, which runs north-south. Residents noted that the only alternative would be hiring more crossing guards — unlikely, given the shortage of funds.

"They'd be putting their kids' lives in jeopardy," said Janet Villalta, who sells real estate and is a mother of three. "You can't put kids' safety at risk."