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TOP STORIES

LI SCHOOL TAXES

Budgets show larger hikes fueled by push for security

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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Surveys of Long Island school districts' proposed 2018-19 budgets confirm that taxes are increasing at a greater pace, with much of the extra money earmarked for security guards and other safety measures.

A Newsday sampling of district spending plans, many of which were completed last week, also indicates that a majority of school systems are choosing to devote additional state-aid funds to student programs and services, rather than to curbing taxes.

A separate review of 101 budget proposals, conducted by a regional network of school business officials, indicates that the average tax levy — that is, total revenues from local property taxation — will increase 2.42 percent in Nassau and Suffolk counties, up from 1.84 percent for the current academic year.

That would represent the steepest increase on the Island since 2013-14.

Prospects of higher taxation are consistent with findings of the Newsday sampling of proposed spending plans and with projections provided in March by all 124 districts on the Island. Those projections, filed with the state comptroller's office, showed an average tax hike of 2.6 percent.

Monday marks the deadline for districts to submit taxing-and-spending plans to the state Education Department. Local districts' proposed budgets are being aired at public meetings in the run-up to the May 15 budget vote.

School levies account for more than 60 percent of homeowners' tax bills on Long Island, which is consistently ranked as having some of the highest assessments in the nation.

Other highlights from the two surveys of the Island's school systems include:

■ A majority of districts kept their tax projections at the same levels set in March or very close

to those levels. Newsday's survey of 40 districts that posted budgets this month found 24 districts with the same increases listed in March, 12 systems with lesser increases, and two with higher increases.

■ A sizable minority of districts lowered the tax projections they issued in March — largely by using extra financial aid, allotted earlier this month under the state budget deal reached in Albany — to reduce the funds needed through property taxation. Central Islip lowered its levy increase from 3.09 percent to 1.66 percent, Roosevelt from 3.3 percent to 1.93 percent, Roslyn from 2.3 percent to 1.72 percent, and Huntington from 3.14 percent to 2.68.

■ Security enhancements are a budget priority for many districts. East Quogue, Levittown, North Bellmore and Sachem all plan to employ more security guards or security aides in the 2018-19 school year. Great Neck also plans to hire additional guards, and wants to install protective vestibules at main entrances of its schools.

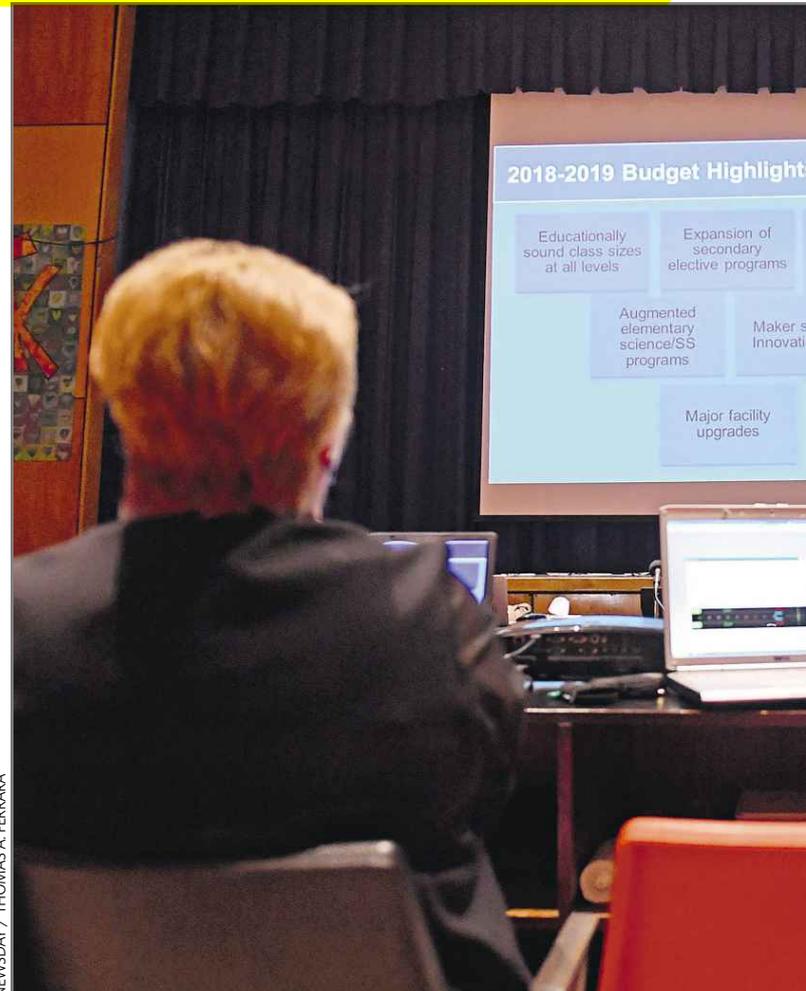
The financial bottom line for school systems received an infusion last month, when the State Legislature approved an extra \$100 million in school assistance for the Island for 2018-19, up 3.57 percent from the current year and about \$36 million more than Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo had proposed. Statewide, the total additional aid was nearly \$1 billion.

A difficult choice

For local education officials, a pressing question was whether to use that additional aid to curb taxation or to expand educational programs and security measures. Arguments were strong on both sides.

On the one hand, taxpayer groups pointed out that a new federal law limiting deductions for state and local taxes, including school levies, could impose greater burdens on many homeowners.

On the other side, growing numbers of parents called for en-



NEWSDAY / THOMAS A. FERRARA



NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

Many districts are planning to hire more security personnel.

hanced protection of their children after the Feb. 14 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in which 17 students and staff members were killed.

In the end, districts split on the question, with some lowering tax projections while others stuck to their original plans for higher increases.

Education leaders defended

RISE FASTER



BY THE NUMBERS

A review of two surveys of LI school districts' proposed 2018-19 budgets indicates:

Average tax levy for 2018-19 in Nassau and Suffolk

2.42%

2017-18 school year

1.84%

Percentage of homeowners' tax bills that goes to schools

60%

Budget numbers are discussed at a Huntington School Board meeting Monday evening. That district is among those that lowered earlier tax projections.

decisions for higher rates of taxation by citing rises in costs of employee benefits and other expenses. They also pointed out that Albany's latest aid increase of \$100 million for the Island's schools, while substantial, was the lowest in seven years.

"Our school districts are not experiencing a windfall," said Lorraine Deller, executive director of the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association. "Extra costs of pensions and health coverage just have to be met. Plus, you have demands from the community for extra services. That's where security and opioid treatment come in."

Heavy staff cuts

The pain is especially acute this year in the Eastport-South Manor district, which is calling for reductions of more than 70

positions of teachers and other staff in an effort to prevent a financial meltdown.

The prospect of higher tax bills for homeowners has generated scattered protests.

At a recent school board meeting in Great Neck, one resident, Vincent Lentini, objected to plans for a higher tax hike than originally envisioned. School officials defended their position, saying the district had been fiscally responsible in never raising taxes beyond the limits set by the state's property tax cap, which first was imposed in 2012-13.

Lentini, an attorney and father of two, later expressed a degree of frustration in a phone interview.

"Am I happy about spending going up in school districts every year? No," he said. "Do I understand why they're doing it? Yes. It's a thankless job for

the people who do it. So I don't know what the answer is."

Joseph Dragone, assistant superintendent for business and administration in the Roslyn system, organized the regional survey that recently compiled budget and tax figures for most districts on the Island, and he understands both sides of the debate on taxation.

Roslyn's decision to reduce its tax increase was based largely on concerns over the potential impact of lower deductions for state and local taxes known as SALT, he said.

"Our board of education has decided that, given all the things that are happening in the economy, especially with the SALT deduction going way down, that they wanted to protect their taxpayers," Dragone said.

With Michael R. Ebert

Copter service loses license in East Hampton

BY JEAN-PAUL SALAMANCA

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Officials in East Hampton Town have revoked a Manhattan-based helicopter service's airport license agreement and are calling for a federal investigation of the company's booking practices, town officials said Friday.

In a statement, town officials announced they were authorizing the town attorney to file a complaint with the Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings of the U.S. Department of Transportation against Fly Blade Inc., a company that allows users via mobile app to book helicopters, seaplanes and jets for travel to East Hampton and other destinations.

The revoking of the license means Fly Blade will no longer be able to operate a check-in kiosk used by passengers of the helicopter app service, East Hampton Town Attorney Michael Sendlenski said Friday. As per the agreement between both parties, the company will have 30 days to vacate the premises at East Hampton Airport in Wainscott.

"The town faces a steep increase in air traffic through businesses that appear to offer, in advance, scheduled passenger service to the airport, either through smartphone applications or by offering scheduled passenger service to the public directly," Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc said in the statement. "It has an obligation not just to ensure that the airport remains safe for all users, but also that adequate disclosures are made to the traveling public with respect to commercial arrangements at the airport."

Edward Burke Jr., the attorney representing Fly Blade, said in a statement Friday that East Hampton officials had not contacted the company regarding the issue.

Burke added that Fly Blade had been "in full compliance with all DOT regulations" dur-

ing flights to "multiple destinations in the East End of Long Island and elsewhere in the Northeast."

"The company has requested a meeting with East Hampton Town representatives to provide an understanding as to how Blade arranges flights within federal guidelines," Burke said.

An investigation by the Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings office found that during 2014, Fly Blade "held itself out as a direct air carrier and engaged in unauthorized air transportation as an indirect air carrier," according to an April 2015 consent order from the department. The agency ordered the Manhattan company to pay a civil penalty of \$80,000.

Despite that, the town states in its April 19 complaint to the enforcement office, "it appears to the town that Blade either continues, or has resumed, the very types of practices that led the Department to find violations in the first place."

Pointing to the frequency of scheduled flights the company publishes on its website between specific points in New York City and East Hampton Airport, town officials stated that they are concerned Fly Blade may be operating more than the allowed four trips per week between departure and destination points that on-demand aircraft operators are limited to under federal regulations.

"This is an opening salvo in the town's exercise of going after people who are misusing our small general aviation airport," Sendlenski said.

"Until such time that they prove that they are in compliance with all applicable laws and regulations, they have no place at East Hampton Airport," stated Councilman Jeffrey Bragman, the town's co-liaison to the airport. "Ride sharing of helicopters which masquerades as scheduled service is damaging to our community and small airport."