

School district puts chief on paid leave

Happens as key budget vote near

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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Eastport-South Manor schools Superintendent Patrick Brimstein, brought into the district in May 2017 as a financial troubleshooter, was placed on paid administrative leave by the district's board Monday evening, local officials confirmed Tuesday.

Nicholas Vero, the board president, declined Tuesday to discuss the reasons for Brimstein's indefinite suspension from his \$224,700-a-year post, citing confidentiality rules.

The administrative shake-up came less than two days before a crucial vote by the seven-

member school board on whether to submit a \$97 million-plus budget to voters on May 21.

As planned, the budget for 2019-20 would be accompanied by a \$512,411 ballot proposition to hire armed security guards, which would push Eastport-South Manor over its state-assigned tax cap.

Vero said that daily operating decisions in the 3,200-student district will be made temporarily by two assistant superintendents — Tim Laube, who is in charge of business and school operations, and Linda Weiss, who handles personnel and district accountability.

"We just need time to catch our breath," said Vero, who acknowledged that the latest management changes are upsetting in a district that has spent more than a year struggling to get its finances in order.

Vero added that board trustees probably would meet sometime next week in order to start the process of hiring an interim superintendent.

Laube and other district staffers voiced confidence that the Eastport-South Manor system will move ahead with budget plans that have undergone months of public hearings and planning.

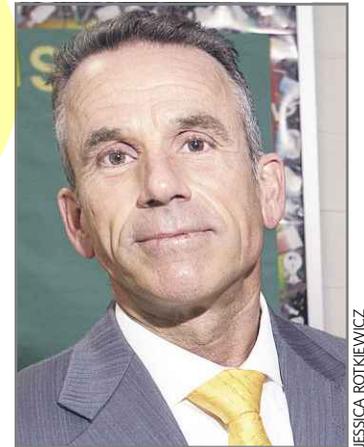
The school board is scheduled to meet in executive session Wednesday evening, then hold a public session starting at 7 p.m. at Eastport-South Manor Junior-Senior High School to make a final decision on its proposed budget.

"I'm confident that the board has been diligent in coming up with the best budget possible for the children and community," said Linda Wygonik, president of the district's 345-member teacher union.

The budget under consideration for the 2019-20 school year would boost Eastport-South Manor's spending by 3.81 percent and raise tax revenues 3.69 percent, Laube said. The projected increases would exceed the district's tax cap and require approval by a 60 percent "supermajority" of voters on May 21.

In January 2018, Eastport-South Manor was identified by the state comptroller's office as among 26 districts statewide facing fiscal stress. A drop in the district's cash reserves led to a downgrade in its credit rating from Standard & Poor's.

At the time, school administrators said the district's fiscal woes had been building for years, as staff levels continued to climb even as enrollments fell. In addition, administrators said, the district repeatedly dug



Patrick Brimstein

into cash reserves in order to curb taxes.

Brimstein himself said repeatedly that Eastport-South Manor had been "living beyond its budget for years." He did not return a Newsday phone call Tuesday.

Eastport-South Manor considered trying for a tax-cap override in the May 2018 balloting, but then dropped the idea.

This year, it is one of only two districts on Long Island planning override attempts. The Wyandanch system, where the fiscal crunch could mean a proposed budget with a tax hike of more than 40 percent, is the other.

With Joie Tyrrell

Trying to defuse religious hatred

BY ZACHARY R. DOWDY
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A unity that transcends faith and rejects the ignorance at the root of religious bias may be the best antidote to violence directed at people for their beliefs, a panel of local Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders said in Elmont on Tuesday night.

"Complacency is sometimes equivalent to complicity," said Afaf Nasher, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations of New York, one of a panel of eight leaders representing the three Abrahamic faiths, at an event to discuss anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of religious hatred and violence. The discussion lasted about two hours.

"What I would like to suggest is that we stop being complicit. . . . We need to hold people accountable; that means media,

politicians. . . . We need to speak to our youth at the dinner table to let them know that it is never OK to utter a racist comment as a joke or otherwise. There needs to be a zero tolerance among us," Nasher said.

The forum, attended by about 20 at the Elmont Memorial Library, was sponsored by Legis. Carrié Solages (D-Valley Stream).

"I do not want to wait for the next massacre or hate-related incident to happen to bring people together," he said, adding that the recent killings of 11 Jews in Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue in October and 50 Muslims in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, "brought me to tears, honestly."

Rabbi Anchelle Perl of Chabad of Mineola said much of the violence directed at people for their beliefs stems from ignorance and a sense of superiority.



Rabbi Anchelle Perl of Chabad of Mineola speaks Tuesday night. ■ Video: newsday.com/nassau

"The key to all of this, particularly anti-Semitism, is ignorance," he said, adding that "everyone must remember there is no pecking order here, no bigger, no less. We all have our diverse religions and outlooks and that's our strength."

Imam Ibad Wali, director of

the Hillside Islamic Center, said there is a double standard when it comes to violence against some faiths. He cited fatal shootings against Jews in Kansas City, Missouri, in 2014; Muslims in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 2015; and Sikhs in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in 2012, as not readily

labeled terrorist acts.

"There is a double standard," he said. "Words that would usually come out and people being outraged if it was a different ethnicity and a different group of people targeted. That type of expression is not there."