

TAX HIKE, CUTS IN SERVICES LOOM AT WYANDANCH

District audit faults outlays, revenue estimates

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND

john.hildebrand@newsday.com

One of Long Island's poorest school districts has warned residents they could face a cap-busting tax hike next year or cuts in students' educational services as local officials struggle with what they describe as an unexpected \$3.3 million budget deficit.

Wyandanch schools Superintendent Mary Jones confirmed the financial news in a recent letter to the community. That communication came after she and her staff faced questions from anxious taxpayers, parents and employees at a Nov. 14 board meeting, when an audit commissioned by the district pointed to overspending and overestimating of revenues.

State Education Department officials acknowledged Monday that Wyandanch faces "fiscal challenges," adding that they have asked the regional BOCES staff to offer assistance.

Jones' letter, distributed in English and Spanish, includes an extensive list of alternatives for saving money — for example, a hiring freeze, layoffs of clerical and maintenance workers, financial givebacks by employee unions and reductions in elective courses, sports teams and busing.

Most of the steps would require approval by the seven-member board. The district, which has about 2,700 students and 400-plus employees, operates on a \$71.3 million annual budget, up 3.76 percent from the previous year.

Jones also raised the possibility of a boost in property taxes during the 2019-20 school year

WYANDANCH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Estimated 2018-19 enrollment

2,763

Current annual budget

\$71,318,257

Approximate budget deficit

\$3,300,000

SOURCES: STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT;
WYANDANCH SCHOOL DISTRICT

that would exceed the state's restriction on taxation. Any such move would require approval by at least 60 percent in the May budget and board elections.

Wyandanch's precarious finances were spelled out in greater detail in an audit covering the 2017-18 year, prepared for the district by the Islandia accounting firm R.S. Abrams & Co.

The audit's major points include:

- Wyandanch overspent its annual budget by \$1,296,989 — a move described by the auditors as a violation of state education law. Key areas of overspending included employee benefits, bus transportation and programs for students with disabilities.

- District reserve funds plunged nearly \$3.3 million, or 68 percent — money that the system now faces pressure to restore. The

drop was caused by a combination of overspending and overoptimistic revenue projections.

- Wyandanch's unassigned reserve — commonly called the "rainy day fund" and meant to meet emergencies — was wiped out, leaving the district with a balance of negative \$1,185,812 in that area.

State financial "report cards" released in May by the state Education Department showed no districts in Nassau and Suffolk counties, out of 121 systems recorded, including Wyandanch, with negative balances in unassigned reserves.

Wyandanch does retain some assigned reserve money, but that is solely to cover pension costs and workers' compensation, not general expenses.

The bottom line is that the district faces "considerable financial strain," Jones stated in her letter, dated Nov. 19.

"It is quite possible that the district might run out of operating funds during the current school year unless costs and expenditures are kept under control," she wrote.

Jones has run the system since 2014. She served an earlier stint from 2008 to 2010.

Wyandanch's drive to economize and rebuild reserves is underway. Union representatives for the district's administrators and teachers were asked by the district shortly before Thanksgiving if their organizations would be willing to grant contract concessions, such as accepting a certain number of working days without pay. Labor leaders said they are giving the subject consideration.



Residents, students and employees of Wyandanch school district

"Of course, people are upset about it," said Sharin Wilson, head of a 42-member union representing secretaries, nurses and technicians. "But under the circumstances, if this would save jobs, that's a guarantee people would want."

Meanwhile, large numbers of Wyandanch school workers, parents and community activists have vowed to continue showing up at board meetings to press for acceptable approaches to closing the budget gap. The next meeting is Dec. 12.

"I'm not happy about having any taxes raised," said Denise Edwards, a retired disabled veteran, who spoke at the last meeting. "And I'm not happy about cutting programs like sports. This is what happens: They cut sports and the kids don't have anything to do and we have too much gang activity."

"At this point, the state should take over the district, because it's a mess," said Janet Villalta, another activist whose three children attend local schools.

Wyandanch's budget woes reflect deeper economic challenges. The district is the poor-

est in Suffolk County in terms of property wealth and taxable income, and 87 percent of its students are considered economically disadvantaged.

Socioeconomic experts said that the district's problems reflect a broader, troubling reality: that a history of housing segregation on Long Island has created a situation in which a few districts struggle to keep up financially and academically with the majority of systems.

"Long Island is one of the most segregated places in the country, and it shows up especially in education, where a handful of the poorest districts have the bulk of minority students and not much commercial property to tax," said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University.

Wyandanch's enrollment was 50 percent Latino and 48 percent African-American in 2016-17, the most recent year recorded by the state Education Department.

Levy added that Wyandanch had shown gains in some academic areas in recent years. This, he said, provided hope that



crowded the school board meeting on Nov. 14, after an audit found fault with district finances.

the district would find a way to balance its budget, perhaps with extra financial help from Albany.

A look at Wyandanch's academic standing presents a mixed picture. Last year, LaFrancis Hardiman Elementary raised its academic achievement and was removed from the state's "priority" list of failing schools.

However, the district's other three schools — Wyandanch Memorial High School, Milton L. Olive Middle School and Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School — remain on state lists indicating that academic performance needs improvement. And in terms of high school achievement, Wyandanch ranks lowest on the Island in students who earn advanced diplomas, signifying adequate preparation for college — just 5.6 percent in 2017, compared with an Islandwide average of 56.4 percent.

At the district's last board meeting, several students warned that any cuts in staff or programs were likely to put them at an even worse disadvantage than they already face.

"This school district lacks a lot of things that other schools

have," said Malaysia Wright, 17, a senior at Wyandanch High.

As an example, Wright noted that the high school has no Advanced Placement courses — college-level programs that most other districts in Nassau and Suffolk counties offer.

Jones acknowledged this in a written response to Newsday's questions, but added that Wyandanch students have other opportunities to pursue college-level studies through cooperative programs with nearby Farmingdale State College.

In her letter, the superintendent blamed much of Wyandanch's fiscal distress on misinformation she said was provided by Robert Howard, a district business official who resigned at the end of the 2017-18 year.

Howard now serves as assistant superintendent for business in the Northport-East Northport district. His boss, Superintendent Robert Banzer, issued a statement last week expressing confidence in Howard and adding he did not believe it appropriate to comment on operations in another district.

Howard did not respond to

calls from Newsday.

Three current or former employees recently notified Wyandanch of their intent to sue Jones and the district for financial damages, saying either that Jones bore responsibility for the deficit or retaliated against them for trying to expose alleged corruption in the school system.

The trio are represented by a Westbury attorney, Jonathan Tand, who said that the superintendent bears responsibility for the district's finances.

"She's head of the district and blaming problems on a subordinate is just a cop-out," Tand said.

Jones, in an email, said she had been advised by the district's attorneys not to comment on the pending lawsuits, which she termed "frivolous."

NOW ONLINE
Read Superintendent
Mary Jones' letter
and the auditor's
financial statement.
newsday.com/education



Traces of two cancer-linked chemicals have been detected.

New tests for private wells in East Quogue

BY VERA CHINESE
vera.chinese@newsday.com

Southampton Town will fund a second round of private well testing in East Quogue to make sure water contamination has not worsened and to determine how to proceed with addressing the issue, which could include funding water main extensions to affected homes.

Traces of perfluorooctane sulfonic acid and perfluorooctanoic acid, chemicals the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has linked to cancers and other health impacts, have been detected in 44 private wells in the hamlet. That testing, performed by the Suffolk County Department of Health Services, came after groundwater samples at a long-closed Damascus Road town landfill detected the chemicals at 150 times the level at which federal officials say exposure in drinking water can cause health problems.

The town issued a request for bids to test the East Quogue wells and could send out letters this week notifying eligible residents, said Deputy Supervisor Frank Zappone. "We want to help people get their water retested and are taking steps to make that happen," Zappone said.

The county Health Department will work with the town and residents to evaluate the new sample data to

help determine how to proceed, Zappone said.

The town board began discussions during its Thursday work session on ways to fund water main extensions in the area and connect those mains to private homes. The Suffolk County Water Authority has estimated that the price of the water mains is \$1.3 million, plus additional costs paid by property owners to connect to the infrastructure. The town and water authority will apply for a state grant to offset project costs.

Last month, Assemb. Fred Thiele Jr. (I-Sag Harbor) and East Quogue residents criticized what they said was a slow response to the issue, though officials said they were working as judiciously as possible. Thursday's work session was the first time a remedial plan was discussed publicly since the detection was announced in April.

The board discussed two methods to finance water main extensions. One scenario involves only East Quogue taxpayers funding the project, and another would spread the cost town-wide. Board members said they favored the latter and will discuss the matter again at an upcoming work session.

The board is also considering having the town lay out money for private connections and roll the cost into the tax bill of the benefiting property owner.