

Wyandanch bracing for deep cuts

Needed even if budget passes, residents told

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The financially pressed Wyandanch school district will cut at least 10 administrative, teaching and other staff jobs, while also slashing \$1 million from student bus transportation, even if a proposed \$73.3 million budget passes in a revote later this month, district officials announced Tuesday night.

Should the budget be defeated, staff layoffs and program reductions would bite much deeper, officials added. That scenario would include laying off or eliminating positions of 30 staffers including 15 teachers; elimination of prekindergarten and after-school academic programs; and sharp cuts in sports, officials said.

The revamped \$73.3 million budget proposal would boost spending 2.8 percent and taxes 20 percent, according to district officials. It would exceed the district's state-capped tax increase of 0.95 percent. For this reason, under law, the package requires

approval by at least 60 percent of those voting to win adoption.

The revote will be held next Tuesday.

Wyandanch's original spending blueprint, which would have sent taxes soaring more than 40 percent, was rejected decisively on May 21, with 332 "no" votes to 149 "yes" votes.

Many of the two dozen residents who attended a public hearing Tuesday night expressed anger and confusion, as district officials contended that the savings in bus transportation would be gained through consolidating bus routes, rather than eliminating students' rides.

"Maybe one bus can handle children from three routes," said Mary Jones, the district's superintendent. "We're looking to collapse some routes."

Jones went on to repeat a point she has often made before — that her prime goal is to save as many academic programs as possible, even if it means cuts in non-academic areas.

Some audience members voiced skepticism, however, over the arguments by district officials that they could save money by reducing the share of bus services outsourced to a regional BOCES, while also saving money by outsourcing more school security to BOCES.



Superintendent Mary Jones answers questions about the \$73.3 million budget proposal Tuesday night.

"It makes no sense right now," said Robert Beato, the father of two students.

The new budget would add about \$920 a year to the average homeowner's bill, according to the district.

Some residents said they would not be surprised if the effort fails again.

"I think more people will vote in favor of it this time, but I still don't think it will pass," said Samantha Lawson, a marketing manager and mother of a second-grader in the district, who was interviewed in advance of Tuesday's hearing. "The community is fundamentally angry at the way the school board is handling our money."

Lawson was among residents who attended a heated board meeting on May 31, when board members decided on their latest budget after 4½ hours of discussion and deliberation.

Shirley Baker, a board trustee for 12 years, said she felt hopeful that the spending plan would pass.

"The people here are committed to the district for the education of our children," Baker said while adding, "You have some naysayers."

The situation could erode further if Wyandanch's budget is voted down a second time.

Under the state's tax-cap law, districts that lose two consecutive votes in the same year must freeze taxation for the next 12 months and adopt "contingency" budgets that bar purchases of new equipment and other nonessential spending.

Wyandanch's contingency budget for 2019-20 would be set at \$69 million — down more than \$2.3 million from the current year's figure.

Board president James Crawford, who won re-election in a

tight race last month, said at a later meeting that the district plans to rally support for its revised budget through "old-school methods, like knocking on some doors."

At the close of Tuesday's 2½-hour budget presentation and debate, Crawford told a reporter an effort would be made to involve parents and students in a social-media campaign in support of the budget.

Crawford himself is an educator and works as an assistant high school principal in another district. While election results indicate he enjoys some personal support, many residents said the district faces an uphill task in winning back public confidence.

One reason for fading trust is a series of critical reports from the state comptroller's office, indicating that board trustees as a group failed to properly monitor Wyandanch's fiscal operations.

TOO-LOW PAY NETS 30 DAYS, PROBATION FOR CONTRACTOR

BY JOAN GRALLA
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A Valley Stream contractor will serve 30 days in jail and then three years of probation for underpaying workers on Bronx school construction projects, while his wife received a conditional discharge, prosecutors said.

Both sentences for Vickram Mangru and Gayatri Mangru handed out in Bronx County Supreme Court by Justice James A. McCarty on Tuesday matched the terms prosecutors

said they expected when they announced the couple's guilty pleas in February.

The husband, who also was initially charged with falsifying business records, pleaded guilty to a felony for failing to pay the prevailing wage. The wife pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor for the same charge.

The duo now has paid \$80,000 to three workers, the state attorney general said in a joint statement with the city comptroller.

The court issued a restitution order for the rest of the

money they owe, \$201,630.09, because they paid employees \$120 to \$160 a day for 40 to 50 hours of work, "far less" than the prevailing wage, prosecutors said.

From Dec. 22, 2012 to Feb. 14, 2015, the workers should have been paid "a pre-determined industry minimum wage per hour, plus a benefit rate" because they were working on publicly funded city construction projects, they said.

The couple also are prohibited from winning state con-

tracts for five years, prosecutors said. Prosecutors did not immediately identify the couple's attorneys or explain what became of the charges brought against the couple's son. All three faced felonies when the charges were unveiled two years ago.

Attorney General Letitia James, who inherited the case from her predecessor, Eric T. Schneiderman, said "Employers who underpay their employees, and attempt to evade wage laws have no business in the state of New York."

New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer said he referred the case to the state prosecutors after discovering that Mangru had formed a new company, AVM Construction Corp., to obtain city contracts after he was barred for labor violations. Stringer's statement echoed that of James, though his language was more punishing.

"There's no place in New York for these kind of acts, and my office will always fight to break the grip of those who cheat our workers — finger by finger," he said.