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The Montclair Board of School Estimate, joined by interim Schools Superintendent Ronald Bolandi (second from left)

The Montclair Board of School Estimate, in its third and final meeting, adopted a \$113,560,781 spending plan for the 2015-16 school year with a 4.15 percent tax levy generating \$105,704,008. The plan notably included new savings in health care benefits worked with the Montclair Education Association totaling \$746,823 along with a previous \$39,500 savings on insurance, an additional retirement saving \$35,744, and about \$60,800 in Internet provider savings, for a total of \$882,873 in additional savings. Also, eight teacher positions and 17 paraprofessional jobs were restored to the budget while keeping the tax levy increase at no more 4.15 percent, which had been a constant objective of the school board throughout March. Brian Fleischer, the district's chief operating officer and the BoSE's secretary, itemized these savings at the start of the meeting.

The BoSE received plaudits from members of the audience for trying to produce a balanced budget without raises taxes too much or cutting too many jobs or programs. MEA President Gayl Shepard thanked the BoSE for the collaboration with the union and the work they did together on the budget, as well as thanking interim Schools Superintendent Ronald Bolandi, who took over from outgoing Superintendent Penny MacCormack the previous Wednesday, for his participation.

"I always say that every crisis equals an opportunity to grow and to learn," Shepard added. "We look forward to the growth and learning that is to be had and shared, and [we're] hopeful."

Parents and educators offered similar acclaim for the BoSE's efforts to listen to and respond to the people of the district. Paraprofessional Jim Zarrilli, a regular participant at school board meetings, thanks the BoSE for creating an

environment that made people feel comfortable and making them feel as if their comments mattered. He singled out Mayor Robert Jackson for acknowledging the plight many paraprofessionals have suffered over the years due to budget constraints and benefit cuts, and he thanked him for it. Resident Sarah Blaine thanked the BoSE for sparing the district the worst possible cuts, though she lamented that ~~the reduced kindergarten class sizes could not be sustained~~ last year the BOE went ahead and decided to fund the kindergarten class size reduction initiative out of fund balance, knowing that there was no source of funding for sustaining the initiative.

Occasionally, though, some comments amplified the painful reality of what was cut and what came close to being cut during the process. Retiring Mount Hebron science teacher Nino LaStella objected to a proposed cut of \$100,000 from the science department in Mount Hebron Middle School, the district's science magnet school, which threatened the greenhouse curriculum and its various agricultural and soil conservation projects, which had been in place since 2006. The cuts that were approved troubled resident and Montclair High School teacher Brian Ford, who said that the district still hasn't recovered from earlier cuts and declared that more resources were needed to improve student instruction.

"We're not going to do it with the budget that we have in front of us," Ford said bluntly. "To propose this kind of budget is immoral." He added that programs that would have made great strides toward desegregating the schools in Montclair were voted down due to budget concerns, and he said that raising taxes 6.08 percent to avoid any cuts and close the achievement gap would have increased the levy on homes valued at \$800,000 by \$68.22 a month, or \$2.27 a day. "If those folks in the \$800,000 homes want to explain to me the value of a \$68.22 month against the value of somebody's job, and against the value of solving the achievement gap, against the value of class size, they're welcome to do it," Ford said. "I'll fill out a guest-speaker form and they can come into my class and look my students into the face."

Even Zarrilli, despite his gratitude, lamented that the number of contract paraprofessionals in the Montclair school district had been reduced from 248 in 2013-14 to 221 in 2014-15, and that more than half of the remaining paraprofessionals have not been offered health benefits, as they were hired after June 2011. "These are the only district employees not offered security for their families," he said, noting also how many substitute paraprofessionals have taken jobs that expire after a certain time. "We are not cans of food that come with an expiration date. "We are real people who need for security for our families."

Resident Andrew Gideon noted that similar districts are able to spend more per pupil because of the tax revenue they collect from malls and business parks, noting Montclair's lack of commercial development, and he suggested that the district consider this problem to foster a greater understanding among residents, especially where unfunded state mandates are concerned. Sarah Blaine also noted the issue, suggesting that a reworking of the formula of state funding might be necessary.

The BoSE members, joined by Bolandi, offered their own comments. Councilor Sean Spiller said he was grateful for public input in helping to find more savings in the 2015-16 budget, allowing the district to be in a better place than where it started from. Councilor William Hurlock said he too was pleased by the numerous responses his office got from concerned residents about the school budget. School board member Anne Mernin, citing the animosity of earlier school board meetings, said that the more open BoSE process underscored the need for the Board of Education to be more communicative going forward, while Bolandi said he was glad to undertake the task of helping Montclair residents find common ground.

Just before the board unanimously approved the budget, Mayor Jackson cited Teruo Nakamura, the last Japanese hold-out soldier from World War II, who had been stationed on an island in Indonesia. Nakamura surrendered to the Indonesians in 1974 – 29 years after World War II ended – and Mayor Jackson said it was time for Montclair residents to put the school conflict behind them as Nakamura had put the war behind him.