

Montclair Board of School Estimate to take look at proposed school district budget

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Following intense scrutiny in recent weeks, the Montclair School District's 2015-2016 budget will undergo its next vetting - by the Board of School Estimate.

The Board of School Estimate, made up of Mayor Robert Jackson, 1st Ward Township Councilman Bill Hurlock, 3rd Ward Councilman Sean Spiller, Board of Education President David Deutsch and board Vice President Anne Mernin, is the body that approves the district's budget.

The Montclair Township Council approved a resolution last month requesting the BOE submit a draft of the budget to the council for review by this past Monday, March 9.

The BSE's municipal representatives told The Montclair Times that district Chief Operating Officer Brian Fleischer had submitted a draft of the budget to them on, March 5.

Jackson said that he's been able to review the budget and has attended recent BOE budget workshops to familiarize himself with the budget.

Right now, the proposed budget has a school property-tax increase of more than 4 percent.

The mayor said that this year's school budget is a larger challenge than last year's which, despite a 4 percent increase, featured additional educational benefits. This year's budget calls for a tax increase with a reduction in staffing and programming, Jackson said.

As the BSE analyzes the budget, Jackson said that there will be a balance between sustaining staff and programming and further reducing the proposed tax levy.

The BSE, by state law, has a limited timeframe to work on the budget. Jackson said that the BSE will first meet on Monday, March 23, with subsequent meetings scheduled for March 30 and April 6 before an April 8 deadline to submit the budget to the Essex County Superintendent of Schools.

Looking ahead to the municipal budget, which had a flat tax levy last year, Jackson said that the township is still absorbing the costs related to this winter's weather. While a small municipal tax levy increase is likely, Jackson said that he is optimistic that any increase would be closer to a 0 percent increase than a 4 percent increase.

In the year ahead, the council will also look to continue to reduce the municipal debt, Jackson said.

Entering with an open mind

According to Spiller, part of the reason why the councilmembers requested to review the budget as soon as possible was so that they may better understand the goals behind it.

While preferring to further analyze the budget before making suggestions, Spiller said that the school district's health insurance costs could be an item for further discussion. He noted the municipal government has been successful in negotiating more modest rate increases.

The councilman said that he does not go into BSE meetings with a final number in his head that he's comfortable with, saying he preferred to find a balance between cost-effectiveness and educational value.

"How can we make sure we can provide the best possible education for the kids?" Spiller said. "How can we have exactly what we need in our community?"

Hurlock, similarly, referred to healthcare costs as an area of focus for the BSE and told The Montclair Times that he does not have a set budget number with which he'd be comfortable.

Noting that he's frustrated by the state-mandated timeframe in which the BSE must go from "soup to nuts to get a budget finalized," Hurlock said that there is no secret that the BSE will be making difficult choices relating to educational resources and costs.

"I take my responsibility very seriously to get the tax-levy level at something residents can sustain while making sure students' needs are met."

THE BOE Perspective

The school budget will be updated once again next Monday, March 16, according to Deutsch. Fleischer will also continue to look at project insurance costs in an effort to reduce estimates, the board president said.

Deutsch said that his goal is to provide the BOE perspective to the BSE and to discuss the pros and cons of changes to the tax levy and the potential impact of the overall budget. Superintendent of Schools Penny MacCormack will attend to discuss the budget, he said.

"The ultimate item we need to accomplish is to get the budget passed," Deutsch said.

Mernin, when reached by The Montclair Times, deferred comment to Deutsch.

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