

The Montclair Board of School Estimate holds first meeting about school tax levy



STAFF PHOTOS BY RICARDO KAULESSAR

The Montclair Board of School Estimate convenes the first of three meetings on this past Monday, March 23, to discuss the school district's tentative 2015-2016 school budget.

Now that the Montclair Board of Education has adopted a tentative \$113.6M operating budget for the 2015-2016 school year, it became the Montclair Board of School Estimate's turn to deal with the figures, specifically the school tax levy.

The Board of School Estimate, a five-member body that will give final approval to the district's budget, held its first of three meetings this past Monday, March 23, in Montclair High School's George Inness Annex.

The board, consisting of Mayor Robert Jackson, First Ward Township Councilman Bill Hurlock, Third Ward Councilman Sean Spiller, Montclair Board of Education President David Deutsch and Vice President Anne Mernin, who was absent from the meeting, spent most of the 1.5 hours of the meeting listening to public comments about the budget.

Before the comments, the board heard from the recently hired interim superintendent for the Montclair School District, Ronald Bolandi, for several minutes and then from district Chief Operating Officer Brian Fleischer.

Fleischer gave an overview of the \$113,560,781 budget at the present time, which includes a proposed 4.15 percent increase to the school tax levy as well as the elimination of 23 paraprofessionals, 10 teachers, four Central Office positions, one school secretary, and one nursing aide.

According to Fleischer, the tax levy will increase from the 2014-2015 total of \$101,492,086 to \$105,704,008 for the

upcoming school year.

He said it will result in an increase of \$369.69 to the yearly tax bill for the owner of a house with an average assessment of \$504,047. That means the tax bill in its entirety would go from \$17,177.92 to \$17,547.61.

But he pointed out that there has been just a 0.38 percent jump in the tax levy since the 2010-2011 school year.

Once the public comments began, the only responses from the board during the meeting were from Jackson, who sought to maintain a calm tone for the evening compared to fractious Board of Education meetings held in recent weeks on the budget.

The Board of School Estimate's next two meetings will be held on Monday, March 30, and Monday, April 6, also in the George Inness Annex, starting at 6:30 p.m. During the April 6 meeting, the BoSE is scheduled to approve the budget.

BOARD IS ALL EARS

As expected, people associated with the school system stepped up to the podium to address their concerns regarding the budget to the Board of School Estimate.

Robin Alvarado, a teacher at the Edgemont Montessori School and a local resident, asked how much the tax levy increase would be if there were no layoffs, and what would be the tax amount per \$100,000.

Fleischer later answered that there would be a tax increase of 6.08 percent. That would result in an increase of \$541.61 to the \$17,177.92 yearly tax bill for the home with the \$504,047 assessment.

Gayl Shepard, the president of the Montclair Education Association, pointed out that many of the cuts of school employees in 2010 have still not been restored to the district and that "additional cuts at this time will only exacerbate these existing problems of too few teachers and large class size."

Shepard then spoke of how the MEA and Fleischer came together to figure out how to find savings from teacher retirements and health-benefit payments that were placed back into the budget, and that she hopes the MEA and the Board of School Estimate could work together in the same manner.

Jackson credited the MEA and Fleischer for working with each other: "I really want to commend the two parties, really for the group to get together and to come together with a number ... Sometimes it is just a small thing to work together as a team."

Residents also addressed the board. Among them were Martha Evans and Rachel Quinn Egan, who along with fellow resident Latifah Jannah, were responsible for a petition circulated online and in person that collected more than 1,100 signatures as of Monday, which called for a budget that does not reflect cuts to teachers and paraprofessionals.

Egan said, "I am asking please, on this occasion, find the money somewhere else."

However, not everyone took the opportunity to speak. After the meeting, local business owner Selma Avdicevic, who has two children in the public schools, shared with The Montclair Times her thoughts about the budget, especially the proposed increase to the tax levy.

"That effectively means that for our household personally, the taxes will go up a thousand dollars, and that is unsustainable," Avdicevic said.

still serving

Sean Spiller sat quietly during the Board of Estimate meeting, betraying little of the recent turmoil in his professional life.

The education advocacy group Montclair Kids First on Friday, March 13, filed a complaint in Essex County Superior Court to prevent Spiller from serving on the BoSE on the grounds that his fulltime job as the secretary-treasurer of the New Jersey Education Association would be a conflict of interest since his role on the board is to approve a budget for the school district.

However, Montclair Township Attorney Ira Karasick told The Montclair Times that Superior Court Judge Thomas Moore ruled against Montclair Kids First's complaint for Spiller to be disqualified before the March 23 meeting from serving on the board, since MKF did not "show anything to alter the status quo" and that the group couldn't claim at the last minute that Spiller serving on the board would be a problem, since he has served on the Board of School Estimate since 2012.

Karasick said he was in the court not as a counsel for Spiller but as an observer, since the township and the council had an interest in the case.

He said the judge pointed out that for the case against Spiller to go forward, MKF would have to deal with some legal issues, and more importantly, identify seven members of the group. So far, only one MKF member, Jon Bonesteel, has gone public for this primarily anonymous group.

MKF issued a statement after the hearing that said in part, "This decision is just the beginning, and an important first step, in bringing greater transparency to our community." The attorney for MKF, Shavar Jefferies, did not return a phone call for comment.

After the BoSE meeting, Spiller told The Montclair Times that the ruling was "excellent," and he was happy that he was allowed to remain on the board.

"I have the residents' interests in mind. I focus on the issue that we're tasked with, and we got an important job here," Spiller said.

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