Quakertown school board votes to raise taxes $117

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer

A lot of changes are coming to the Quakertown Community School District next year, but one thing staying the same is the annual tax increase.

The district, which has raised the millage rate each year since the 1970s, is hiking property taxes 2.9 percent for the 2017-18 school year.

The $109.2 million spending plan, $4.5 million higher than this year, requires the use of $3.15 million in savings to balance.

The total school tax bill is $4,150, $117 more than this year for the owner of a home assessed at the district median of $26,308. The district's millage rises to 157.77. A mill translates to $1 in tax for every $1,000 of a property's assessed value.

While most districts can raise taxes 2.5 percent without seeking an exception from the Pennsylvania Education Department under the index set by Act 1, the state's property tax law, Quakertown's index is 2.9 percent because of its higher poverty rate of 31 percent. Other Bucks districts with a higher index are Bristol Borough, Bristol Township and Morrisville — all are above 3 percent.

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The big change includes the merging of seventh- and eighth-graders into Strayer Middle School, shifting all sixth-graders to the freshman center and moving ninth-graders to the high school as part of a plan to eliminate a structural deficit of $4.7 million in the next two years.
The district will hold a special board meeting on July 18 to vote on the closing of Milford Middle School. In the fall, after hearing from an elementary reassignment options ad-hoc committee, the board will vote on the closing of Tohickon Valley Elementary School.

School officials have said the closing of both schools could save $2 million a year in operational costs.

The district also considered eliminating its cyber program, which more than 300 students use for at least one course, to save an additional $500,000.

The district is working with its teachers union to bring back most of the courses in a hybrid model, Superintendent William Harner said.

"I hope we accomplish that by the end of August," he said.

Directors Robert Smith and Steaven Klein voted against the budget in a 6-2 vote.

Smith called the budget highly inflated and said it has areas to cut "other than getting rid of programs and closing schools." He added that the potential closings of Milford and Tohickon Valley were not the reasons for the decreasing structural deficit, which other officials took issue with.

"It's not end of story because there are costs on the other side of closing schools," he said. "If you're just looking at dollars, you can look at closing other schools."

Paul Stepanoff, the board president, said the district could be more efficient operating three schools rather than four.

"One mega school would make things more efficient," Smith said.

"We're not talking about mega schools," Stepanoff said. "We are now more fully utilizing the buildings we have left. There's no denying that."
When asked by a parent if the merger would limit opportunities for students in music and athletics, Harner said, "We'll sustain all programs."

Athletic director Sylvia Kalazs said Strayer would have two varsity teams in each sport "to maintain the same level of participation."

Both the Milford and Strayer uniforms will be used, she said, calling them Quakertown blue and Quakertown white.

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Gary Weckselblatt: 215-345-3169; email: gweckselblatt@calkins.com; Twitter: @gweckselblatt