Quakertown school director eyes more work to cut 2017-18 budget

With a preliminary budget that raises spending by nearly $11 million next year, the chairman of the Quakertown Community School District's Finance Committee has called for an additional meeting to cut costs.

Chuck Shermer said he wants "to pare down the gap" between the current budget and the 2017-18 preliminary budget of just under $113 million.

"I want to get to the final number quicker, and spend the extra time in making sure we get to all the efficiencies that are due," he said. "I just want to spend some more time on it."

The Finance Committee, which meets the fourth Tuesday of each month prior to the regular school board meeting, will also meet at 6 p.m. on Feb. 9 before the 7 p.m. board meeting.

Last June, directors passed a spending plan of $104.7 million for this year. However, the district is on pace to spend $102.1 million, according to budget documents given to the board last week by business manager Robert Riegel.

Shermer credited "good fiscal management" by Superintendent William Harner for shrinking spending. But Shermer warned "that's the double-edged sword for him" because the bar is set at $102.1 million as opposed to $104.7 million.

Harner said the difference in the spending increase from budgets presented in January and June "usually comes in half of that or less."

Part of that, he said, has been because of a multi-year restaffing strategy that's allowed for the repurposing of more than 20 positions. In addition, he said, the district has 80 fewer positions since 2005.

As part of next year's budget plan, the school board unanimously agreed to a "Budget Opt Out Resolution," meaning any potential tax increase will stay within the limits of Act 1, the state's property tax law.
While that percentage is 2.5 percent for most districts, Quakertown's index is 2.9 percent because of its poverty rate.

The mathematical formula that determines the Act 1 index includes things like real estate market values and personal income. Other area schools with a higher index are Bristol Borough, at 3.4 percent; Bristol Township, 3.3 percent; and Morrisville, 3.1 percent.

Shermer, the school board's vice president, said that besides needing more time to go over the budget, he's wary of "what's going to come of Harrisburg."

School officials across the state are fearful of a measure to eliminate most property taxes in favor of increased sales and income taxes. Several superintendents and school board members met this week in Warminster to discuss the issue.

Sponsored by state Sen. David Argall, R-29, of Berks and Schuylkill counties, the plan has bipartisan support and failed in the last legislative session by one vote.

This week, Senate Democrats sent a letter to Gov. Tom Wolf requesting that he call a special session of the General Assembly to ensure significant property tax relief or total elimination is passed and signed into law this session.

State Sen. Lisa Boscola, D-18, of Northampton, said, "My goal is to pass legislation that will eliminate the property tax and replace it with a better system to fund public education. Our homeowners deserve it and our children need it."

With the writing on the wall, Quakertown school board President Paul Stepanoff has suggested the district support amendments to a bill to keep the money local rather than send it to Harrisburg.

He would have the tax collectors who gather the earned income tax also collect the state income tax, and have local businesses do the same with the sales tax.

Harner, Quakertown's superintendent, said that in his nine years of building budgets in Pennsylvania, the proposed legislation "makes this year the least predictable."