

Teachers' jobs may hang in balance
By John Johnston
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Cutting seven administrative positions is one direction West Aurora School District 129 is taking to balance a bleak financial forecast, but cuts in teachers may be next if the district does not vote in a referendum to pass an operations rate increase in April.

Chief Financial Officer Kevin Wegner said a failed vote on April 17 referendum could result in the elimination of as many as 90 staff positions — 30 teachers each from elementary, middle and high schools.

However, he said those numbers were a preliminary estimate based on the district's need to cut \$5.7 million from its budget should the vote fail. The district projects a \$2.9 million deficit next year.

The board of education, supporting several teachers in the crowd, requested administration to look at a phased staff reduction over several years instead of a large one-year dump, including how retirements may affect the projections.

"This is very difficult because we are talking about our most important resource, our teachers," Board President Richard Slocum said.

Pat Butler, a department head at West High who has been in the district for 33 years, said the board should use a five-year plan with retirements to reduce the number of teachers affected or it risks driving qualified teachers away.

"We did not get into this situation yesterday and we don't have to solve it tomorrow," Butler said, "You can't release people and expect them to come back. It's a huge mistake."

The district's first option is to pass the operating rate increase, which would preserve the teaching positions for the cost of \$.50 on \$100 equalized assessed value of district homes. The money would be used for operational expenses.

Without a new rate, Wegner said the \$5.7 million cut would put the district on a sound financial footing and drive revenue over expenses. He said a one-time cut was the way to minimize the reduction in staff.

Just over \$4 million would come from staff cuts, with the district finding money by being more efficient. Superintendent James Rydland announced the reduction of seven administrative positions Monday, which will save the district over \$500,000.

The district cut a similar number of administrative positions last year.

Rydland said a new service contract that joins with East Aurora district 131 for special education transportation —which accounts for over 60 percent of bus costs in District 129 — could be a significant cost cut through efficiency.

Finding more efficient ways, he said, is an ongoing process the district will pursue.

“We are looking at everything all the time to save money. We have a culture of continual improvement,” Rydland said.

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