

PENINSULA NEWS REVIEW

School board prepares for shortfall

By Christine van Reeuyk - Peninsula News Review

Published: March 17, 2009 1:00 PM

The provincial funding formula is again under fire as School District 63 expects to deal with a \$3.6 million budget shortfall for the next school year.

"We're concerned about the impact of the budget challenge," said Saanich school board chair MaryLynne Rimer. "Undoubtedly, it'll be difficult; it's five per cent of our budget, and the single largest reduction in Saanich history."

They'll be looking at options to make the budget work — cutting services — while continuing to lobby the province for more funding leading up to the final budget meeting May 6. Rimer and district superintendent Keven Elder visited local MLA Murray Coell at the legislature in early March to discuss the funding formula.

The formula continues to be a concern, since lower enrolment doesn't pan out to equivalent drops in costs. "It's all about bums in seats, to be crass," Rimer said.

She said the shortfall from enrolment decline since 2005/06 is \$3 million, which is partially offset by the \$712,000 saved through school closures. The projected student decline for the next school year is 253, leaving a funding reduction of nearly \$1 million. Saanich is expecting an enrolment decline of another 545 students by 2011/12.

School closures over the past few years have saved the board about \$1 million.

"But again, it's not the level of savings that can offset the loss of funding over the years," Rimer said.

The district started planning in 2005/06 for the shortfall expected because of declining enrolment. They set aside savings from school closures (\$924,000) and some unspent funding between 2005 and 2007 (\$871,043 each year) plus some funds from investments and building leases.

"We were able to put some of that money aside for future years," she said. "We spent almost all of our reserves this school year [2008/2009]." About \$3 million of that went to the budget last year, leaving the reserves with \$414,567.

While funding from the province has risen in the past few years, those increases haven't covered the overall cost pressures added to the school board, some by the province, Rimer said. With hard economic times, Rimer said, everyone's being told to take their share of the burden.

"Education shouldn't ever take its share," Rimer said, noting there is support for post secondary education. "You need the same level of support for K to 12. It's false economy to under fund education in a time of economic downturn. You have to ensure that public education can nurture future citizens."

She also argues that the public school system provides education opportunities, "from cradle to grave" with early education and adult literacy programs.

With 87 per cent of the budget spent on staffing (815 full time equivalent positions), the district may need to cut jobs. That would mean larger class sizes and reductions in building maintenance, transportation, support for special needs, and support programs such as library, counselling and career programs. Faced with a list of possible reductions — totalling a possible \$4.3 million — the members of the school board all said they were not happy.

"It's the worst I've seen in my years on the board; it's just hit after hit," said trustee Helen Parker. With the board putting the list of possible reductions out for public input, trustee Elsie McMurphy suggested that they also ask if the public had any alternative suggestions. "We can close a secondary school, we can close a middle school," she said. "Do you want the death of 100 cuts, or do you want this type of suicide? What kind of terrible things do you want us to do to the school system?"

The list of possible budget cuts is available online at www.sd63.bc.ca. To share suggestions or comments, email budget@sd63.bc.ca.

reporter@peninsulanewsreview.com

-with files from Cat George

See Possible cuts on page 12

School district 63 has released a list of possible budget cuts that may be necessary to make up the projected \$3.6 million shortfall for the 2009/10 school year and are asking for public input.

The list covers a wide range of possibilities, running from reductions in supplies to reductions in staffing. There are two parts to the list — recommended reductions, as suggested by the finance and facilities committee, and other options, those that would have more impact.

Recommended reductions include the loss of 1.5 full-time district instructional support staff members; the loss of the music itinerant teacher; the reduction in security patrols on weekdays; the elimination of the annual public information booklet; and the introduction of \$50,000 in rental revenue from the lease of McTavish and Saanichton schools.

The recommended reductions, however, only total \$969,316, thus making it necessary for the board to add at least some of the other options.

Those include: reducing to one Integrated Learning Centre site, at Broadmead; cutting the crossing guard program; closing the district resource centre; cutting staffing in the library and literacy support positions; cutting up to 10 full-time teachers; no longer paying for any field trip, PE, or musical support fees; a longer spring or winter break; an increase in bus fees; and the elimination of the early learning coordinator position, among others.

More information and the complete list is available online at www.sd63.bc.ca.