

Officials, residents urged to work to preserve district's state funding

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WEST NORRITON — An informal meeting of Norristown Area School Board members and administrators, elected officials from Norristown, East Norriton and West Norriton and a handful of residents Monday night concluded that local efforts to protect the district's state funding allocation are crucial in the upcoming fight over the state's fiscal 2009 budget.

The district's \$125,709,220 budget and "zero" percent increase in the real estate millage rate of 28.417 mills is dependent on the wholesale adoption of Gov. Ed Rendell's education budget with its large state subsidy for the Norristown Area School District. An alternative budget embodied in state Sen. Bill 850 and endorsed by Republican senators would slice \$1,529,111 from the basic education and special education state allocations. Another \$1,520,524 in federal stimulus funding would be cut from the district budget under the Senate bill.

Janis Risch, executive director of Good School's Pennsylvania, estimated the bill would cut Norristown Area School District's state allocation by 22 percent (\$292 per pupil); the Pottstown School District by 21 percent (\$596 per pupil) and the Wissahickon School District by 8 percent (\$40 per pupil). The state's funding formula was "frozen" at 1991 levels, plunging poor school districts into a spiral of ever-lowering tax assessments on real property as local school taxes increased to compensate for inadequate state funding of education.

A "costing-out" study adopted in late 2007 bumped up state funding formulas for the first time in nearly two decades that took into account a "poverty measure" and the number of non-English speaking students and special education students.

School Board President Janice Pearce said the board had worked for a 0 percent tax increase. "We want to be good stewards of tax resources," she said. "In the past month we have testified in Harrisburg three times" on budget issues.

State Rep. Matthew Bradford, D-70th Dist., the former solicitor of the school board, said the state's \$3.2 billion budget gap would probably not be seriously addressed until close to the June 30 deadline for a new state budget.

"We've got to make tough decisions. Norristown has been underfunded in the past," Bradford said. He

noted that proposals to raise additional state revenue through a state sales tax or modify local real estate revenue with a personal income tax (PIT) had met with stiff resistance.

The state legislator derided the political “shell game” of placing blame on opposing parties for budget woes.

Supt. Janet Samuels said the state Senate’s proposed \$317 million school budget cut “would hurt many schools in Pennsylvania including in Norristown.” She urged the 25 participants in the meeting to work together to e-mail, write and call local legislators to preserve Norristown’s state funding.

“It’s significant that everyone is sitting at the table,” Samuels said. “By sitting together we are each connected to our children.”

Business administrator Ann Marie Rohricht said, “SB 850 is horrible for basic education. We hope our legislators are pressured to do better. It rolls back state funding to 2006 levels.”

Norristown Councilman Gary Simpson suggested enlisting parents in political lobbying by sending letters home with Norristown Area school children. Samuels said she was “leery about sending things home” through the school district.

School board member Karen Shanoski said the group could begin the lobbying effort and expand it outward.

Norristown Municipal Administrator David Forrest said the “First Suburbs” organization might be able to aid lobbying efforts.

“We need to mobilize our community to contact our legislators,” one resident said. “We need to broaden our net. The apathy of residents is a problem.”

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