

Residents suggest ideas for budget

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Neshaminy

One by one, dozens of residents, students and staff stood at the Maple Point Middle School podium with the same message: Think again.

That was the Neshaminy community's response to the board starting to discuss ways to trim the \$7.6 million deficit, including eliminating kindergarten, closing pools, instituting a pay-to-play and getting rid of the district's alternative program.

Grant Passman, a guidance counselor at the Learning Center, said the district's alternative program saves the lives of teenagers on the verge of dropping out or even taking their own lives. Several students and parents tearfully testified that the school is like a family.

"This program has and continues to have the most profound impact on students' lives," Passman said. "Students in need of intervention. These are good, great kids, but they're troubled and fragile and they need a place like TLC."

Board member Susan Cummings pointed out that the board has been dedicated to the program and continues to support it.

Natalie Caruso, a 16-year-old freshman at Neshaminy High School who also works for the aquatics program, asked the board to save the district's pools.

"I've seen people come in that didn't know where their head was at, they kept getting into trouble, and this has helped them," she said. "Now, they're trying harder to be better people. If you take that away, other people won't have those chances."

The public said there has to be another way.

Before outsourcing support staff jobs, which many residents said wouldn't offer guaranteed long-term contracts, community members suggested raising taxes on apartment complexes, which business administrator Joseph Paradise said would be illegal.

An anonymous letter writer recommended every single district employee from the administration down giving up one day's pay. Some people also questioned how administrators received raises if there is no money. District officials have claimed Neshaminy could save more than \$30 million by outsourcing transportation, custodial, grounds keeping and food services.

Mindy Anderson, president of the Neshaminy support staff, said her union members have suggested many ways to save money over the years, and will continue to do so.

"We're always willing to help, but we alone should not have the burden of solving all of the districts' financial problems," she added.

Members of the Neshaminy Educational Support Professional Association, which includes 270 full-time and 282 part-time positions for jobs ranging from bus drivers to janitors to food service workers, have been working off an expired contract since July. The union and the board are in the process of working with a fact-finder, administrators said.

While school board directors have said Neshaminy can't keep paying for a top tier health insurance plan, union members have said they can't afford to contribute what the board is asking.

Paradise said the financial crisis is a real, serious problem in the district, state and country. Roughly \$5 million of Neshaminy's deficit came from a 19 percent increase in health care costs, and hikes in special education and the state retirement system, he said.

Board President Ritchie Webb added that the district has spent its savings to cover costs and lost revenue due to the economy. He admitted that administrators received raises because they agreed to a contract that the

teachers turned down, which included contributing to their health insurance premiums. The district is also restricted by Act 1 taxing limitations, said Webb.

"Nobody wants to see anyone lose their job," he said. "But given the choice between your kids' education, I have to err on the side of the kid."

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"Residents suggest ideas for budget" Bucks County Courier Times 24 Mar 2010: B1