

## **SCHOOL BOARD REPORT**

### **A Better Learning Environment**

The passage of the \$300,000 fire/life safety bond at the March 2007 School District meeting triggered a wave of improvements to the school's physical plant and brought the district into compliance with state safety and fire code requirements. A school-wide sprinkler system was installed, additional means of egress were added, and asbestos removed. The entire wood interior of the school was painted with a fire retardant paint, giving the school a brighter look as an added benefit.

These projects were completed on time and for approximately \$230,500 -- well below the \$300,000 bond amount. The Board will use the approximately \$69,500 in unexpended funds to offset some of the tax impact by applying the money towards the first principal payments on this five-year bond, and debt service on the 2001 school addition bond, due to retire in 2010. In addition, over the next five years the state will reimburse the school district for 30% of the capital expenditures of the life/safety project, reducing its net cost to approximately \$161,350.

School maintenance budget funds also went toward some smaller, but important projects, including the addition of doors between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, additional soundproofing and insulation, and new carpet at the front of the school.

Collectively, these projects improve the safety and comfort of our children and provide a bright and welcoming environment that we believe leads to improved student learning.

### **2007-08 Fiscal Highlights**

The Board is also pleased to report that we ended the last school year with a general fund balance surplus of \$191,633, primarily due to higher than anticipated revenues such as interest income, food service and Medicaid funding, and lower than anticipated expenses, particularly in regards to tuition payments and transportation. Consistent with past practice, we returned this surplus to taxpayers, thereby reducing the need for additional tax revenue from \$306,407 to \$114,744 for the 2007-08 school year.

At the School District Meeting last March, voters approved a budget increase of \$306,407, or 6.1%, for the 2007-08 school year. This included funding for the main operating budget, new teacher and support staff contracts, building reserve fund and the life/safety bond discussed above. The use of the surplus to offset the increase has resulted in a combined school tax rate increase of just 3.3% this year, lower than the projected 6.1% increase.

This latest increase is in line with modest tax hikes over the last five years that have roughly tracked the rate of inflation. Using 2003 as a baseline, the combined school property tax rate has increased \$2.60, an average increase of 65 cents per year, equal to 4.07% per annum. These modest increases come despite rising health care and energy costs, more funding of special education, and unfunded mandates at the state and federal level.

### **Proposed 2008-09 Budget**

For the 2008-09 budget year, the Board is proposing a 3.91% increase in main budget expenditures. The main operating budget includes teacher and support staff contracts and the initial principal payment on the life safety bond approved at last year's School District meeting. The School Board also recommends approval of four other warrant articles, two of which are proposed to be funded only if available by transfer from next year's surplus.

The \$206,802 proposed increase for 2008/09 is due primarily to two factors: rising special education costs that have added \$98,821 to the budget to care for students in greater need of individualized services, and a debt service increase of \$58,698 attributable to the first-year principal payment on the life/safety bond. Other increases are seen in employee benefits and building operation, the latter being driven by higher heating and electrical costs. The school recently implemented energy conservation measures that have already reduced electrical costs by 11%, and that should reduce heating oil costs by a similar measure.

In addition to these non-discretionary increases, the remaining money is chiefly focused on two main areas -- technology and teacher training/curriculum development -- that the Board and Administration believe are necessary and worthwhile investments in our educational mission.

**Technology:** Based on recommendations from the Administration and the Plainfield Technology Group, the Board is proposing a \$31,038 increase to the Information Services budget (1) to remedy deficiencies in the school's network and infrastructure; and (2) to invest in leased computers for an internet-connected mobile lab with 20 computers that will move between classrooms. While this lab does not make the school "cutting edge," it does help bring Plainfield School technology resources and educational opportunities in line with other schools in our area. New state educational regulations mandate that schools integrate "21<sup>st</sup> century tools, including . . . digital technology and communication tools in all curriculum areas" and for all students to become "proficient in the use of these tools to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information in all core subjects."

**Teacher Training/Curriculum Development:** The Board proposes to add \$8,700 to provide for additional teacher training and expedited curriculum development. The teacher training is a cost-effective "train-the-trainer" strategy to maximize staff development opportunities at PES.

Adoption of this budget, taking into consideration projected revenues and the offsetting bond surplus and anticipated 08-09 surplus, would raise the projected local tax rate by 3.96%.

The Board continues to unanimously support the warrant article seeking to fund a half-time Assistant Principal: \$30,000 is requested to establish a position to address facility, transportation, logistical and student disciplinary issues, so that the Principal can focus more on curriculum development, teacher evaluations, mentoring and other academic leadership issues. The Board also is putting forth a warrant to purchase a new Kubota tractor to replace the existing machine at a cost of \$21,304.

The final two warrant articles proposed by the Board recommend transferring money from the 2008-09 surplus, if any, into the building maintenance reserve fund (\$30,000) in anticipation of work to make the school parking lot safer and larger; and to open a new "Benefits payable trust fund" (\$20,000) in anticipation of state-mandated increases in 09-10 to an under-funded state retirement plan.

Respectfully submitted,

Carin G. Reynolds  
Chair