

## Palmyra OKs tax hike, cuts positions

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PALMYRA — The Palmyra Area school board last week unanimously approved a \$35.8 million budget for 2009-10.

The spending plan includes a 3.5-mill property-tax increase, which raised taxes from 88.25 to 91.75 mills.

A mill is \$1 of tax per \$1,000 of assessed property value. That means that the owner of a home assessed at the district median of \$23,500 would pay a bill of \$2,156, up \$83 from the current year.

Initially, the board had considered a \$36.4 million budget, a 6.8 percent increase over this year's. Board members rejected those figures, asking Superintendent Larry Schmidt to tighten the district's belt.

In trimming the budget by \$600,000, three teaching positions were eliminated. The reductions will be achieved through attrition — that is, not filling vacancies.

These cuts would eliminate a third-, a fourth- and a fifth-grade class at Northside, increasing the number of students in the remaining classrooms and forcing about 64 students from Northside to be moved either to Pine Street or Forge Road elementary schools.

Before Thursday's meeting, the administration received a petition signed by more than 30 fourth-graders from Northside Elementary School asking the teaching positions not be eliminated.

"It was not an easy decision not to fill these positions," Schmidt said.

Residents and teachers filled the board room but did not make a final appeal to the board. Once the budget passed, the room emptied.

Board President George Downey said he was not happy with the budget.

"I thought our original budget was a pretty good budget," he said. "I wish Senate Bill 850 never came about."

Senate Bill 850 is the state budget the Senate passed last month. It could cause the district to lose about \$650,000 in state funding.

"I wish we didn't have to eliminate the teacher positions," Downey said. "However, I think we did make some less painful cuts."

As further cost savings, the district instituted "lab fees" for art programs, will no longer pay for "in-car" driver's education and tightened athletic budgets.

If a state budget is passed relatively soon and the district receives more state funding, Downey and Schmidt said, the eliminated teaching positions may be filled.

"It is a possibility, but things would have to happen quickly," Schmidt said. "I'm not sure how fast we could fill those positions."

Schmidt and Darcy Brenner-Smith, director of business affairs, called salaries, health-care costs and debt service the biggest increases in the budget.

"Those were the larger increases, but we were able to keep them relatively low," Schmidt said.