



## **Budget contains small tax hike District to eliminate five vacant positions, add one**

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ATHENS — The Athens Area School District Board of Education Tuesday voted 5-3 to formally adopt the district's budget for the 2009-2010 school year, which includes a small tax increase for residents.

The board also voted to eliminate a total of five vacant teaching positions, and add one new teaching post at Gladys Burnham Elementary School in Ridgebury.

### **Budget**

The district's budget for the 2009-2010 school year is valued at \$33,941,258, which is \$2,195,539 more than this school year's spending plan of \$31,754,719.

The 2009-2010 also calls for the district's millage rate to increase by 0.7 mills, from 41.9 mills to 42.6 mills.

The tax increase means that a resident who has a home assessed at \$50,000 would pay an additional \$35 on their school tax bill.

One mill generates approximately \$230,000 in revenue for the school district.

When the budget was first released in its preliminary form last month, it originally included a one mill tax hike.

At Tuesday's meeting, School Superintendent Doug Ulkins explained that when district officials first received Gov. Ed Rendell's budget proposal for the next fiscal year, that it would have a positive impact on the Athens Area School District.

"We were talking about keeping the tax increase at an absolute minimum because of the way the economy is and the way that everybody is struggling in this area," he said. "We were able to, in fact — despite Senate Bill 850 (the state Senate's proposed budget) and the threats from Republicans in the Senate to cause a great deal of hardship for local school districts — to cut this (tax increase) down to only seven-tenths of a mill, which is a very, very minimal tax increase for our citizens."

However, the district had to eliminate five teaching positions for the next school year, said Ulkins.

"The board is hopeful — and I certainly am as well — that if some money is restored from Harrisburg, the first thing this board will be doing is looking at trying to restore some or all of those teaching positions that we had to eliminate, knowing that these cuts also do potentially make a hardship on families and our teaching staff, and might affect negatively our

instruction, which is the last thing that we want to see happen," he said.

Ulkins praised the school board members for the "phenomenal job" on the district's budget for the next school year.

"They were emphatic about not having any kind of tax increase at all," he said. "What we did, we had to do in order to balance the budget, including the elimination of (five) teaching positions. They did it with a great deal of trepidation, a great deal of soul-searching and debate amongst them."

The school board voted 5-3 to formally adopt both the budget and next year's tax increase.

Voting in favor of both measures were board members Gary Gee, Jim Priester, Lonnie Stethers, Shirley Dimmick and Randy Vargason. Casting the "nay" votes were Board President Ed Gorman, Board Vice President Karen Brennan and board member Karen Whyte.

Board member Charles Frisbie was absent from Tuesday's meeting.

Gorman spoke after Tuesday's meeting regarding his "no" vote on the budget and its accompanying tax increase.

"I just feel that, with the economic conditions and what the local businesses are going through with all the lay-offs, ... any (tax) increase is not viable at this time," he said.

Position eliminations

The five positions that will be eliminated for the 2009-2010 school year are:

- a fifth-grade teacher at Sheshequin-Ulster Elementary School.
- a fourth-grade teacher at Lynch-Bustin Elementary School.
- a third-grade teacher at Gladys Burnham Elementary School.
- a kindergarten teacher at Gladys Burnham Elementary School.
- a mathematics teacher at Athens Area High School.

These positions were chosen for elimination because — with the exception of one post — they are already vacant through resignations or retirements, said Ulkins.

The lower class sizes that the district will be encountering in the elementary grades for the next school year also played a factor in this decision, he added.

"When I say lower, I mean 20 (students in a class)," he said. "I mean, (they are) still a little bit higher than we are comfortable with, but it is something that we can live with — with the hope that we can bring those positions back if we get a more reasonable (state) budget."