

State budget impasse having ripple effect

Published: Sunday, September 6, 2009

By Evan Brandt, ebrandt@pottsmmerc.com

POTTSTOWN — As Pennsylvania forges further into its fiscal year with the distinction of being the only state in the union without a budget, its impacts are being felt throughout the community.

Low-income parents who had taken advantage of the free pre-kindergarten program for their children are losing their jobs due to the absence of child care; some of those day care centers are endangered; the school board is eyeing the necessity of closing Rupert Elementary School; and Pottstown school board member Rick Huss is cursing up a storm during school board meetings.

The board is hoping the community is as spitting mad as Huss; mad enough to come to a special open meeting Thursday at Pottstown High School, where representatives of Gov. Ed Rendell's office, the Pennsylvania Budget Office and, maybe, a local state legislator or two will be on hand to explain themselves and answer questions.

"I will be extraordinarily disappointed if that room is not filled," school board President Judyth Zahora said of the high school's 1,200-seat auditorium where the meeting will be held at 8 p.m.

Superintendent David Krem said he arranged the meeting in the hopes that people in the community would understand the position into which the budget impasse has put the school district.

That would be a welcome change for school director Julia Wilson, who said The Mercury headlines about the potential closing of Rupert had parents "mocking and ridiculing" her as she walked her children to the first day of school Monday.

"My children came home telling me other kids had said they couldn't play with them because their parents said their mommy wanted to close Rupert," Wilson told the board Thursday. She also said flowers in front of her house were knocked down and a rock thrown at her door.

"That was the week at the Wilson household," she said.

Wilson was not at the Aug. 27 finance committee meeting at which the potential closing of Rupert — eyed to cut \$1.2 million out of a school budget which may receive less in

state aid than it did last year — was discussed, nor has the board made any definite decision. Instead, it has outlined a series of other cuts that would occur before taking the drastic step of closing a school.

Wilson gamely brushed off the neighborhood invective in a subsequent conversation with a reporter. "Some people are just ignorant," she said.

But as the state budget impasse drags into its third month, there are people suffering in ways other than unjustified abuse at the hands of their neighbors. Jeff Sparagana, the district's director of education, said a state program funds slots for 126 Pottstown families to send their children to a pre-school aligned with Pottstown's curriculum through its PEAK (Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness) program.

He told the school board Thursday that because the Legislature and governor have failed to come to agreement on a budget, the program did not start with the rest of the school district's programs on Aug. 31. That failure has had repercussions throughout the Pottstown community, he said.

"Not only are parents losing jobs because children are not able to be in the program, the centers that provide those programs are laying teachers off, cutting hours and cutting pay," Sparagana said.

In fact, Sparagana said, the day care centers themselves are being threatened by the lack of state funding for their programs.

Montgomery County has stepped up to an extent, filling the funding gap, "but that will dry up at the end of the month," said Sparagana.

Many of the staff at the district's day care partners "are looking for other jobs because of the uncertainty," he said.

Beyond those immediate economic impacts are the backsliding the district's neediest children will experience in later school years if a resolution is not soon reached, said school board member Michele Pargeon.

"It's absolutely not right," Pargeon said. "They're putting people out of work because of no child care and who will end up picking up the tab when those children come to school and they're not ready to learn," she said.

"Everybody loses," Pargeon said. "The taxpayers, the school children, the school district, the entire community loses."

"And just when we're making so much progress," said Zahora.

The fact that every school in the district this year, for the first time, met all the benchmarks set up in the federal No Child Left Behind Act, is evidence of Pottstown's

progress, said Krem; progress which may be lost without early education programs and other programs the district may have to cut with lower state funds.

To drive these points home to state officials, the school board is hoping the community comes out in force to Thursday's meeting.

"I thought we would have people at tonight's meeting after the news about Rupert came out," said board Vice President Robert Hartman.

"The talk on the blacktop was what's the sense of coming out, we can't speak," Wilson said of her neighbors.

"Well, I hope people come to this meeting Thursday and say what they want, because that's exactly what it's for," said Zahora.

Few board members seemed convinced the state officials would have anything of substance to say.

"That's a crock of s%%t," Huss said.

"They're just going to send us people to tell us the usual bullcrap. The bottom line is those people in Harrisburg have the balls to take a holiday when we still don't have a budget?" Huss said of the Legislature's Labor Day break.

"I don't believe they're going to tell us anything we haven't hear a hundred times," said Zahora. "But it's important they hear about how they're hurting our community and the extreme steps the district is preparing to take if they don't get their act together."

In the meantime, the board did make a small vote of defiance in regards to the budget crisis. The absence of state aid forced the district to borrow money last month, taking out a "tax anticipation note" for as much as \$2 million in order to make early payments on health insurance, which saved taxpayers about \$200,000 in local dollars.

Had the district used the entire \$2 million, the 5 percent interest would have cost taxpayers about \$4,500. As it turned out, the interest bill was about \$3,800.

With a unanimous vote Thursday, the board voted to send a bill to Harrisburg seeking reimbursement.