

School tax talk gets red-hot

By: CHERYL ALLISON , Main Line Times and Main Line Life
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ARDMORE - Reaction to a proposed school property tax increase of 14.3 percent in Lower Merion was slow to start to smolder, but it burst into flame Tuesday night.

About 75 district residents turned out for the school board's fourth meeting and final public hearing on a spending plan for 2006-2007 before budget adoption June 19.

The message was nearly uniform: Spending is running out of control, and it's time to rein it in. The focus of most of their alarm was the long-debated plan to build two new high schools to replace the Harriton and Lower Merion buildings, with a total price tag of \$220 million or more. But there were also calls to take a serious look at the broad range of programs on which Lower Merion has prided itself.

The session, as it happened, started with recognition of several more champion academic and athletic teams.

But Narberth resident Stephen Gallagher wasn't the only one who pointed to a ranking the district might not want to tout; it's tops in Pennsylvania for per pupil spending, with the figure headed to more than \$25,000 next year. "I wouldn't mind if we slipped to Number 10" on a few things, Gallagher remarked.

"Everybody does this yearly head scratch when they get their tax bills," wondering why the bill is going up, said Michael Petroni. "You write the check, and life goes on." But this year, word of the double-digit tax hike and 15-percent spending increase has changed that, he said.

Many of those who spoke acknowledged they haven't kept informed on such initiatives as the high school modernization. Part of the night was a history lesson on the long community process and subsequent studies and designs that led to the current two-school plan. They remained convinced, however, that there is fat to cut.

Most were alerted to the meeting by the efforts of a few people, notably Bill Manginelli, who attended a budget hearing last week and set out on an awareness campaign, distributing fliers at the Narberth Memorial Day parade and Wawa.

For this meeting, he came prepared with comparisons of per pupil spending and other budget elements for Lower Merion, Radnor and Tredyffrin-Easttown school districts.

Looking at figures that differed by as much as 63 percent between Lower Merion and Tredyffrin-Easttown, and nearly 40 percent over Radnor, he told board members they should be taking a hard look at those margins. "We need to look at these other districts and find out how they're doing it," he said, as the crowd rose to its feet and applauded.

Board members reiterated the pressures of mandated programs without funding, the costs of delays in starting construction of the high schools, and more. They said they sympathized with statements by older residents who said they worry they won't be able to afford to keep their homes.

But residents weren't placated.

When Superintendent Jamie Savedoff said reductions large enough to ease the tax impact would mean eliminating programs that set Lower Merion apart from other districts, there was applause. "You can't have everything," one audience member called out.

Tell them how you feel!!!!

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