

# Grand Island's allowable increase in school tax levy clarified as 3.2%

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The allowable increase for the Grand Island School District's tax levy is now 3.2 percent, officials said Wednesday night during a second public forum on the tentative \$54.1 million budget for the 2012-13 school year.

At a forum earlier this week, officials said the district could legally raise the tax levy by 3.61 percent.

The new percentage, which could yield about an additional \$500,000, resulted from a meeting Tuesday attended by area school districts at which more specifics were available on how the calculation is done.

The state's 2 percent cap on the increase in the tax levy is the starting point. One of the factors used in calculations is multiplying the existing tax levy by the percentage increase in the town's property tax base. Then there are several items that are included or exempt from the final calculation.

The Board of Education has not yet made any decisions on what it will cut from the next budget in an effort to close a gap of nearly \$7 million between expenditures and revenues.

And the percentage increase for the tax levy also is not yet set by the district. But the 3.2 percent figure is the amount that it can increase the levy with a simple majority of voters approving the budget in May. If it were to exceed the 3.2 percent, it would need a supermajority of 60 percent.

Despite the morning forum drawing just one district resident, Mark A. Major, Superintendent Robert W. Christmann gave a full presentation on the tentative budget. The board held evening and morning forums hoping to get input from district voters on what they wanted to stay in the budget and what they would be willing to eliminate.

Christmann said the district had hoped to get input “on the front end of this process,” noting that once the reductions are devised “people will come in and want things added back in.”

Included in the projected revenue shortfall is \$2.5 million from the appropriated fund balance; \$990,515 in federal education job funds; \$600,000 in the debt service reserve fund; \$300,000 in the Employee Retirement System reserve; and \$100,000 from the unemployment reserve allocation.

Anticipated increases include \$1,068,358 for staff salaries; \$367,500 for special-education tuition; \$267,146 for health insurance; \$239,250 for the Teacher Retirement System; \$129,000 for the (non-instructional) Employee Retirement System; \$115,000 for utilities; \$82,187 for BOCES contracts; and \$50,000 for building maintenance/heating and air conditioning.

Among things the board will consider to trim costs are the possibility of sharing business office functions with another school district and approaching faculty and staff about salary and benefit concessions. Salaries and benefits comprise 74 percent of the budget.

At the forum, Christmann said: “I don’t see how we can escape [having] a smaller staff next year, . . . and it will encompass several categories of staff.”

Major said he would prefer to see cuts in areas other than those affecting “reading, writing and arithmetic,” noting that the nation needs more people prepared for science and technology jobs.

Christmann agreed, saying that’s why the capital project approved by district voters in December “focuses on science and technology needs . . . maintaining our academic core is a priority.”

He also agreed with Major that parents might have to “help out a bit more than ever before” with the costs of non-academics such as sports while the board grapples with creating a budget that does not adversely impact the district’s “high achievement in academics.”