

Otter Valley budget heads back to voters

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BRANDON — The Otter Valley school budget is going back to the ballot box.

The \$22.7 million budget for the six-town Otter Valley Unified Union School District failed on Town Meeting Day by a vote of 462 to 522.

Now, the district has scheduled a new vote for April 26.

The revised budget, which is essentially in line with the first, proposes \$22,705,955 in expenditures. The result would be \$17,044 in education spending per equalized pupil, a 9.7% increase over the current fiscal year.

The district was able to cut an additional \$5,000 in expenses, according to Superintendent Jeanne Collins. She noted the minor cut was made in order to comply with state statute, which calls for a “revised” budget.

Collins said the administration recommended making those cuts from the health insurance benefits line. She explained since it's often unclear what benefits newly hired employees will need, it's an area she felt comfortable cutting from.

“We believe that that's a place to reduce some money without cutting programs and services to kids,” she said.

However, Collins attributed the budget's failure in March not to its size but to low voter turnout — a result of confusion over the state's recently expanded mail-in voting laws.

In Otter Valley, the district's two largest towns — Pittsford and Brandon — opted to send mail-in ballots to all voters this Town Meeting Day while its remaining four towns of Leicester, Whiting, Sudbury and Goshen held in-person votes. According to the law, ballots for the school budget, which are cast separately from municipal ballots, may only be mailed if all member towns agree to do so.

Collins said the public has made it “loud and clear” in recent weeks that there was confusion over how to vote.

She said the district is stepping up efforts to get the word out via local newspapers, social media and email to make sure people show up this time around.

An informational meeting is also scheduled at 6:30 p.m. April 25. A link to view it online will be posted at www.rnesu.org on the day of the meeting. Collins added that ballots should be available at town offices by the end of this week and urged people to vote early.

“You don’t have to wait until the 26th to vote,” she said

Laurie Bertrand, chair of the OVUUSD School Board called March’s low turnout “disappointing.”

She acknowledged the confusion and expressed concern it might happen again. She said Brandon has already indicated it plans to keep mail-in in place moving forward.

“Until the Legislature changes that rule, we’re not going to be able to mail our ballots,” she said. “So I think we’re just going to have to really do a full-court press and make sure people understand that our ballot is not out there, and that people realize that they have to ask for it.”

Collins added the proposed budget also reflected a unified tax reduction for the district of 5.5 cents and returned it to pre-Act 46 levels of taxing. Education spending per equalized pupil, meanwhile, was \$1,000 less than the state average of \$18,023.

“I think that’s a message that got lost the first time around, too,” she said. “Otter Valley continues to try to provide quality programs at an affordable price and this budget continues to do that.”