

Otter Valley School District to re-vote budget on April 26

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BRANDON — Otter Valley Unified Union School District voters will have another opportunity to decide the fate of their district budget via an Australian ballot vote on Tuesday, April 26, which will be preceded by an informational hearing on Monday, April 25. Voters in the six-town district will be asked to cast ballots at each of the town polling stations, or cast votes with an absentee ballot.

That decision was made this past Monday at the board's regular meeting, at which the board also determined they would hold a special hearing at the start of their April 6 board meeting to get public feedback on the budget. At that meeting, they will decide the amount of the budget to be warned.

At Monday's meeting the board had a lengthy discussion about the proposed budget of \$22,710,995 and the reason for its narrow 522-462 defeat. Board members reported that most voters they talked with said they were either confused about why the school budget vote wasn't included in their mail-in ballots along with the town ballots in Brandon and Pittsford or were upset at the school district for not making mail-in ballots available.

That misunderstanding, board members concurred, led to a significantly reduced turnout and possibly the budget's defeat. Turnout on this year's school budget was 984 total votes cast compared to almost 3,000 votes cast in March 2021 when the school mail-out ballots through all six communities.

RNESU Superintendent Jeanne Collins again explained that the school district was prevented by state law from sending out mail-in ballots because all six-member towns did not also send out mail-in ballots for their town races. Of the six OVUUSD towns, Sudbury, Whiting, Leicester and Goshen did not send out mail-in ballots, while Brandon and Pittsford did.

Similarly, because not all towns were willing to handle mail-in ballots for the upcoming April 26 revote, school district residents will either have to vote in person at their respective town polling places or ask their town clerks for an absentee ballot, if they won't be present on that day.

In a Monday interview with Supt. Collins and Brenda Fleming, director of business and finance for the district, both said the district and board would attempt to answer all the public's questions about the budget over the next two weeks ahead of April 5 meeting soliciting community feedback. Specifically, they hope to answer questions like:

- What does this budget buy?
- What is budget's impact on the tax rate and how does that compare to others?
- What happens if the next budget doesn't pass?
- What adjustments to the budget — increases, decreases or keeping it the same — will there be?
- What impact has the pandemic had on student learning and costs to the district?

As well as other questions the public might raise.

Plans are being made to address those questions and others in a Question-Answer format in The Reporter in upcoming issues in mid-April.

Fleming did say that the budget is not "buying a lot of new," but cast the budget as a fairly conservative amount to cover the district's needs. Fleming noted the district spends \$1,000 less per pupil than the statewide average, and while school spending was up in this year's budget, the district-wide tax rate is down 5.5 cents compared to the prior year.

District voters who have questions about the budgets are encouraged to go to the district's website and connect with the Let's Talk function by simply clicking on the button or send a text message to: 802-243-0461. You can also share your thoughts via email at rnesu.vt@k12-lets-talk.com.

The board also must find candidates for three open board seats. They may either appoint people to fill those seats for one year, or wait until the special election on April 26 if candidates step forward in time. Both processes, Collins said, normally take at least two months. The vacant seats are: one year remaining of a three-year term representing Leicester; a three-year term representing Pittsford; and one year left of a three-year At-Large term.

OTHER BUSINESS

In other business at the Monday meeting:

- Laurie Bertrand was confirmed for another term as board chair, Derek Larson was named as the vice-chair, and Barbara Ebling as appointed as clerk. Mike Lufkin, Barbara Ebling, and Laurie Bertrand were also elected to the RNESU Board, while Kevin Thornton was named as the representative to the Tech Center advisory board at the Stafford Technical Center.
- A presentation was made by State Rep. Peter Conlon, D-Cornwall, who serves on the House Education Committee, and Rep. Stephanie Jerome, D-Brandon, of the House Commerce Committee on school issues. In particular, they focused on Act 173, the special education funding bill. They speculated that based on fiscal year figures from 2020 and 2021, the public should expect \$4 million to \$6 million to be spent on special education funding in 2023. They indicated that \$25-\$40 million dollars would be spent on free meals (breakfast and lunch) statewide for students.

Rep. Jerome explained that they would be a total "re-write" of Chapter 11 regarding formation of union school districts, which would include the process of district towns withdrawing from a school districts as Ripton and Lincoln have recently done. This would be the first total re-write of Chapter 11 since it was written in 1967, she said. She also mentioned that pending legislation involving school mascots as well as funding for private schools was working its way through the legislative process.

To help relieve teacher shortages in schools across the state, Rep. Conlon explained that pending legislation would allow Vermont retire teachers to be able to return to work without losing any pension benefits, which is not currently allowed under Vermont law. This is being passed because of the shortage of teachers many schools are facing.

- Three representatives (James Kalb, Susannah White, and Joanie Wisdahl) presented information regarding the Edmentum Assessment, a Panorama SEL (Social Emotional Learning) tool. A recent study attempted to answer the following questions:
 - How are students doing?
 - How valid and reliable are the results?
 - How are we doing on equity?

Mr. Kalb displayed several charts that indicated where Otter Valley students are grading out in several categories to meet certain criteria. The board recommends readers contact a board member for further information about the study and its outcome. Further information about the study can be found on the school district's website.