

OVUUSD budget largely intact as voters reconsider on April 26

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BRANDON — In its meeting last Wednesday, the OVUU board opted to keep its 2022-23 budget largely intact ahead of a revote set for Tuesday, April 26. The new budget of \$22,705,955 is \$5,000 less than the budget voters defeated on Town Meeting Day, 522-462, in a turnout that was only a third of what it had been the previous year when almost 3,000 people cast votes.

That \$5,000 was trimmed because of a recalculation of health care insurance coverage for district employees.

At the meeting, the board said it was assured by outreach they had done over the previous weeks that voter confusion over how and when to vote was the cause of the budget defeat, not because of voter dissatisfaction with school operations.

In March, residents in Pittsford and Brandon received mail-in ballots for town elections, while all other district towns voted in person. Many voters in Brandon and Pittsford told OVUU board members they didn't realize they would also have to vote in person for school issues, in addition to the mail-in ballot.

This time around, all OVUU district residents — comprised of Brandon, Pittsford, Goshen, Leicester, Whiting and Sudbury — will vote in-person at their town's regular polling places on Tuesday, April 26. Voters also have the option of going into their respective town clerk's office anytime after this week (once the ballots are printed and received) to request a ballot and vote early if it's not convenient to vote on April 26. Voters may also request an absentee ballot and mail it in as long as that's done before April 26.

MAIN POINTS OF BUDGET

Driving the discussion on the budget are two seemingly conflicting points: first, the new budget proposal is up 7.8% over the previous year, yet the budget has a 5.5 cent decrease (4%) in the unified tax rate. That reduction in taxes actually brings the district tax rate back to pre-merger days six years ago.

Driving the budget increase is a new three-year master teachers' contract that raises the wage grid by about 7% the first year and 3% the next two years. That agreement will bring RNESU's teachers' pay up to about the middle of the pack among eight regional schools, whereas today the wages are next to the bottom among those schools and administrators reported difficulty retaining teachers. Contracted salary and benefit increases make up about 80% of the district budget.

Other factors driving increased cost are higher levels of inflation on fuel and other commodities and inflationary expenses in general.

Importantly, said Superintendent Jeanné Collins, no new programs were added to this year's budget from the current year.

Other cost drivers to the budget included: adding 11 pre-K tuitioning students and a couple of para-educators between Neshobe Elementary, OVUHS and Otter Creek Academy were modified to yield slightly more coverage.

As for COVID-relief funds, the RNESU district received \$9.7 million "to support district-wide COVID response and recovery services from March 2020 to Sept. 30, 2024. That spending and programing is entirely funded by the federal government to negate the impact of hybrid and in-home schooling during the pandemic, and will be phased out once those funds are spent.

Interestingly, OVUU is one of the few rural districts in the state that has not seen declines in student enrollment. On the contrary, student population throughout the district has held steady and seen some growth. While that is good news in terms of state funding and a steady population growth among families, it's important to note, Collins said, "the increasing behavioral and social emotional needs of our students returning from two years of COVID-impacted instruction." Part of that need has been addressed through the \$9.7 million in federal dollars, but the effects are widespread, she said.

DISTRICT UPSIDES

Collins and Board Chair Laurie Bertrand cited several strengths of the district as examples of programs that had strong community and school support, including: the Walking Stick Theater, quality athletic programs, SOAR after school programs, universal Pre Kindergarten, maker space program at OVUHS, local tech program on big equipment, Lifetime Activities program, 4-Winds Nature Program, college dual enrollment and more.

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Laurie Bertrand

Bertrand said she hoped voters will turn out in higher numbers for the April 26 revote, and hoped they understood the board's primary objective.

"The message I want to send to voters is this: Our budget and our focus should be from a student outcome lens. We know that kids are trying to recover from this pandemic and that they need more support, whether that be academic or social-emotional," she said. "We also need to support our teachers, staff and administrators as they have been on the front line."

"The Board wants to center its focus on student outcomes and provide kids with opportunities within a reasonable budget," she added. "We believe that students should graduate ready to move onto the next phase of their life, whether that be college, entering the job market, or something else. We believe his budget does that."

An informational hearing open to the public will be held at the school on Monday, April 25, a day ahead of the April 26 vote.