

http://www.heraldsun.com/news/funding-tensions-may-prompt-change-in-budgeting-process/article_5c1b1d24-2779-11e6-bd99-17cce9004968.html

EDITOR'S PICK

Funding tensions may prompt change in budgeting process

Katie Jansen Updated 16 sec ago

CHAPEL HILL — Tensions at a recent meeting of the Orange County Commissioners and representatives from both school districts may lead the commissioners to look to a new budget process in the future.

Orange commissioners Chair Donna Coffey said her board was “disappointed and a bit surprised” at the funding recommendation of \$99 million, which focuses on funding charter school students, as well as school resource officers and nurses.

Although the allocation is a \$2.6 million increase from last year and 49.4 percent of the general fund — more than the funding target of 48.1 percent — it falls short of the combined \$8 million in additional funding the schools had requested in April to increase teacher pay.



Building Permit

Enter Your Zip Code &
Connect To Pre-Screened
Permit Services Pros!



After the recommended budget was released, teachers, parents and students flooded two public hearings, asking commissioners to fully fund schools.

Fully funding the request would require a tax increase of 4.79 cents per \$100 valuation, or \$47.90 per \$100,000 valuation.

“Our priorities certainly remain the same,” Orange County Superintendent Todd Wirt told the commissioners, adding that increased teacher pay would help both districts address recruitment and retention problems.

Teacher turnover in both districts has increased by about 7 percent since 2010, compared to a statewide rate of about 3.6 percent, said Travis Myren, deputy county manager.

Coffey said the funding proposed in the recommended budget won’t even meet Orange County Schools’ continuation costs, let alone its expansion costs, as state mandates cost the district \$1.8 million.

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools Board of Education Chair James Barrett said his district has similar priorities.

The district's Board of Education approved in April a supplement increase for next year that will cost more than \$1.8 million. Teachers who are new to the district and those who opt in to a new program called Project ADVANCE will automatically receive a 16 percent local supplement next year.

Barrett said he knows the district took a risk, but its board is asking the county to help where it can.

"If we're going to maintain the quality, we have to be able to attract and retain the best quality teachers," he said. "I don't want to open school in September with more elementary vacancies."

Chapel Hill-Carrboro Superintendent Tom Forcella said the move to increase the supplements did make a difference in securing new contracts for next year, especially for Exceptional Children teachers.

Forcella also spoke about Project ADVANCE, which he said is not tied to the funding request for next year.

But Commissioner Penny Rich had questions about Project ADVANCE.

Rich said she had received emails from teachers asking the commissioners not to give money to the program, which will administer teacher pay based on professional development rather than teacher longevity.

The emails transformed into phone calls, Rich said, after teachers said they feared retribution from the district if they spoke out publicly about the program.

"These teachers are saying they feel they're being made to jump through hoops," Rich said, adding that she is worried the program doesn't respect the district's veteran teachers.

Forcella said the impetus for the program came from the teacher advisory council he works with and seeks a way to better implement costly professional development.

“I would say the vast majority of teachers have no problems with Project ADVANCE, especially the younger new teachers coming in,” Forcella said.



In response to concerns about the recommended budget, several of the commissioners said they wanted to find a more collaborative and innovative way to have budget discussions in the future.

Commissioner Barry Jacobs said he thought the budget process is set up to be “way too confrontational, way too stilted and way too inflexible.”

“If we’re going to talk about being progressive, lets be progressive about how we talk to one another and communicate with the public,” he said.

Rich agreed.

“This is my fourth year doing this (budget process), and it never feels good,” she said. “You don’t have easy jobs, and we know that. But I just think we’ve got to come to a different way of doing this.”

Commissioner Bernadette Pelissier said the problems stemmed not only from the budget process, but also from people’s ideas about the recommended budget.

Pelissier said the county manager always tries to present a budget without a tax increase, but it is up to the commissioners to decide whether to raise taxes.

She said she’d be willing to raise taxes for schools but that the board needed to discuss the possibility.

Commissioner Mia Burroughs, a former Chapel Hill-Carrboro Board of Education member, also pointed out there was flexibility within the recommended budget.

“At least this year, I will be advocating pretty hard to get pretty darn close to the ask,” she said.

The budget is scheduled to be adopted June 21 after it undergoes several more work sessions.



Contact Katie Jansen: kjansen@heraldsun.com, 919-419-6675. She blogs about Orange County at Orange Pulp: <http://bit.ly/OrangePulp>

Katie Jansen

Katie Jansen covers Orange County for The Herald-Sun. She graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 2014, where she studied journalism, English and creative writing.