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EDITOR'S PICK

## Budget answers \$5.4M of \$8.1M schools' funding request

Katie Jansen Jun 25, 2016

CHAPEL HILL — After a contentious budget season among Orange County Commissioners and the two local school boards, the commissioners unanimously approved a budget for fiscal year 2016-17 Tuesday night that allocated \$5.4 million more to schools than last year.

The education allocation of the \$242.3 million budget fell \$2.7 million short of the school districts' original request of an additional \$8.1 million to fund teacher raises.

The approved budget, which takes effect July 1, maintains the tax rate at 87.8 cents per \$100 of property valuation. Taxpayers in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro school district will continue to pay an education tax of 20.84 cents per \$100 of property valuation.



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Commissioner Mia Burroughs attempted to gain support for a tax increase of 0.6 cents, which would raise roughly \$1 million more for schools and further close the funding gap.

Commissioner Bernadette Pelissier, who will retire next term, supported the increase, adding that she wanted the board to explore other options.

But the other commissioners were wary of a tax increase before a potential bond referendum in November, the majority of which would support schools.

The other commissioners also noted that although property taxes have not increased recently, residents are paying more in other taxes and fees.

Instead of raising taxes, the commissioners looked to a variety of places to add education funding to the original \$2.6 million addition recommended by County Manager Bonnie Hammersley.

Commissioner Barry Jacobs moved to take \$1 million from the county's impact fees, as well as \$800,000 from funds that were above the county's fund balance of 17 percent.

Commissioner Mark Dorosin supported that funding, but also proposed the commissioners draw \$1 million from the fund balance.

Dorosin said he'd like to discuss in the fall changing the policy that keeps the county's fund balance at 17 percent, a target he called "overly conservative."

"It's better public policy to not be hoarding savings when we have critical needs across this county — not just in schools, of course," he said.



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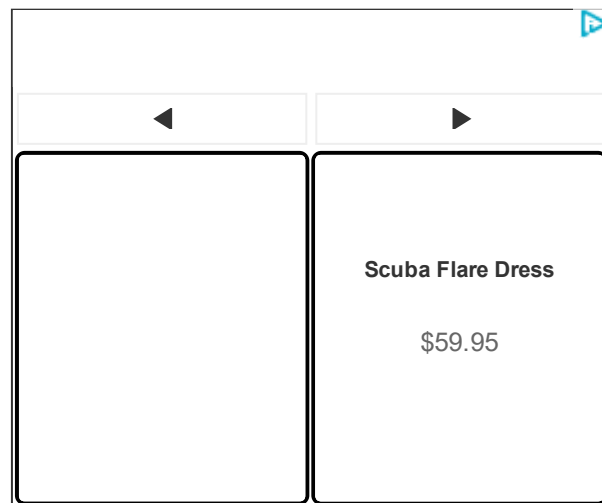
Jacobs, a longtime commissioner, said the per pupil increase of about \$271 was the second highest Orange County has ever seen. That brings total per pupil spending from the county to about \$3,868.

“So for those who keep insisting that we don’t support public education or we’re not generous to our schools or that we don’t listen or we’re shortchanging children, parents and teachers, it is just not true and the numbers say so,” he said.

Tensions rose this budget season as parents, teachers and students crowded the commissioners’ chambers to ask them to fully fund schools, noting that many teachers work second jobs to stay afloat.

Commissioner Penny Rich said she welcomed the idea of discussing the fund balance in the future, as well as entertaining other changes to the budgetary process, such as planning ahead for multiple years.

Rich said that although the commissioners feel like they are in unique times because of the state’s lack of support for education, “This is the new norm. We’ve got to figure out a way to support our schools as best as we possibly can given the disastrous General Assembly we currently have.”



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