

Local school districts brace for aid cuts

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV

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Grafton, Northern Ozaukee top county list of hardest hit by state reductions that could result in tax hikes, pared spending

Most school districts in Ozaukee County are expected to receive less general state aid for the 2013-14 school year — a potential blow to some school systems that could result in higher local property taxes and spending cuts, local administrators said.

According to the aid estimates released last week by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, local districts are among the majority of school systems throughout the state that are expected to lose as much as 15% of their general state aid despite a 1.1% increase in the total amount of aid to be distributed by the state.

Hardest hit in Ozaukee County could be the Grafton School District, which is expected to see its general aid cut by 11.8%, a loss of \$657,312.

The Northern Ozaukee School District also faces a significant decrease — 11.1%. That would result in a \$318,536 aid reduction for the Fredonia school system.

The Cedarburg School District could see an 8%, or \$725,255, reduction while the Cedar Grove-Belgium School District faces a 3.6% aid cut that would cost it \$210,464.

The Port Washington-Sauville School District is expected to see the smallest decrease locally— a 0.9% cut that would result in a \$109,847 reduction.

The Mequon-Thiensville School District, which receives relatively little general aid, is the only district in the county that is expected to see an increase. The district is expecting a 0.18% increase worth \$3,930.

General state aid is calculated using a complicated formula based primarily on property values and per-pupil spending. Districts that have relatively high property values and spend more receive less general aid.

Noting that the neighboring Oostburg School District is one of the 193 school districts in the state expected to receive more aid, Cedar Grove-Belgium School Supt. Steve Shaw said, “There are some area district that are taking big hits, and there’s Oostburg, which is on the other side of zero.

“It’s weird. If you can figure out how this works, let me know.”

Typically, districts don’t have to cut spending because of aid reductions but rather can increase local property tax levies to make up the difference.

“This (aid reduction) doesn’t decrease the amount of revenue we can raise, but it would place a higher burden on taxpayers to do it,” Kristin Kollath, Grafton School District’s director of

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business services, said.

Noting that the aid figures released by the state are estimates and final numbers won't be released until Oct. 15, local administrators said they are considering a number of options to handle the expected cuts but hope for better news in fall.

In the Grafton School District, the \$657,000 decrease is less than officials anticipated in spring, when they estimated a \$883,000 shortfall for the purpose of preliminary budget talks. At that time, the district expected an enrollment decrease of 40 students this fall.

In response, the School Board in April eliminated one full-time art teaching position at Grafton High School, a four-tenths elementary-school music teaching post and a special-education aide; pared by 20% teaching positions in foreign languages, English and social studies; and reduced building budgets by 5%.

Supt. Mel Lightner said he and other district officials will continue to study cost-cutting options, including additional staff cuts, to offset the revenue shortfall rather than raise taxes.

"We have a lot of work to do, including looking at staffing numbers," Lightner said.

In the Northern Ozaukee School District, the projected aid reduction is an unpleasant development in an already challenging budget cycle, but drastic spending reductions aren't expected, Supt. Blake Peuse said.

"The budget was very tight even before we received the aid estimate," he said. "With the lower dollar amount, we will have to make some decisions about how much to levy."

Shaw said it's important to keep the aid reduction in perspective.

"When you work with a \$10 million budget, \$210,000 isn't that much," the Cedar Grove-Belgium school superintendent said. "We'll figure it out."

Although the anticipated aid reduction for the Port Washington-Saukville School is the smallest in the county, it came as a surprise to school officials who have already trimmed spending by about \$570,000 in a preliminary 2013-14 budget approved by the School Board last month.

That budget calls for a 0.2% increase in the property tax levy and rate, but those figures could increase slightly to make up for the aid reduction, Director of Business Services Jim Froemming said.

"I was a little surprised by the aid estimates," he said. "I had anticipated we'd be at par or a little better."

Ozaukee Press reporters Steve Ostermann, Mark Jaeger and Carol Pomeday contributed to this story.