

Centennial debates new middle school program

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, April 8, 2014 11:00 pm

The Centennial School Board approved a program Tuesday night that Superintendent Joyce Mundy said would better prepare middle school students for high school.

However, while all members commended the program as a benefit to student learning, a debate on district spending developed after the chairman of the district's Finance Committee suggested a piecemeal approach to its implementation.

Michael Hartline, the lone nay in the 8-1 vote, said he'd prefer to give tax relief to the community.

"I'd like to have the administration restudy this program and have cost savings alternatives in January," Hartline said. "I'm not against the program ... I want to make it more efficient."

He said as things stand, Centennial might seek a 5.3 percent increase in property taxes for 2014-15. Hartline said taxes have spiked 62 percent in the last nine years, raising a \$2,000 property tax bill in 2005 to \$3,200 this year.

"For individuals on fixed incomes that's difficult," he said.

Mundy and other board members expressed sympathy for taxpayers but said the program was too important to not move forward.

And Chris Berdnik, the district's business manager, said the middle school plan was "revenue neutral."

"It's important to understand this proposal has many different pieces to it," Mundy said. "A fragmented proposal would not be something this administration will support. ... It's time to make sure the focus of this discussion is about students."

Board member David Shafter called the budget "the big elephant in the room" and said, "It's imperative that we do pass this program tonight and worry about this budget in May and June."

Jane Schrader Lynch, the board president and a senior citizen, said she would like tax relief. However, she added, "If we don't improve education my house value will be decreasing. We need a foundation for young people to move forward."

She criticized the state for a pension system that without reforms has "doomed" districts. "No one on this board controls the state, the federal government. We're a small little group of nine. Do I want to save dollars? Oh, my gosh, yes. But this is neutral, not costing taxpayers."

Kati Driban, possibly the director most closely aligned with Hartline on this issue, questioned the program's costs.

"I love the idea, I support change," she said, "but I haven't seen the (budget) numbers to back it up,

and that gives me pause. ... I'm a little leery to pass this tonight without being able to see the impacted numbers on the chart.”

Steven Adams said the board has been “good stewards” of the taxpayers’ money and strongly supported Mundy’s “very well done proposal.”

“The state and federal governments put the tax burden on us,” he said. “That’s the new reality.”

He called for “foresight” and “creative educational thinking about what may happen in the future.”

The plan creates four lead teachers in English, math, science and social studies to work with 12 curriculum and student liaisons at Log College and Klinger middle schools. The lead teachers each will be paid \$4,000 for their additional duties. The 12 liaisons will receive \$1,000 each.

Students in grades six through eight at the district’s two middle schools are divided into two teams. That model would be changed for seventh- and eighth-graders so those students could take more classes per day.

Mundy said the changes would “build a better bridge to high school” and end what she described as a “disconnect” because “we don’t have the right structures in place.”

“We’re trying to build a very solid program where children can attain success in a variety of areas.”