

## State check is not in the mail for school building projects in Bucks, Montgomery counties

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Monday, April 11, 2016 6:00 am

The state's denial of funding school construction and renovation will hit local property owners in the pocket.

Residents in Bristol Borough School District have to cough up an additional \$58. Centennial homeowners will pay \$50 more, Quakertown Community homeowners will pay \$48 more, Pennridge homeowners will pay \$46 more and Souderton Area homeowners will pay \$44 more.

The higher tax bills are a result of the latest political football in the budget dispute between Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf and the Republican-led General Assembly.

Funding for PlanCon was part of Wolf's veto of a budget document known as the fiscal code. Districts go through a variety of steps to qualify for state reimbursement of building projects through a complicated formula. The veto, however, means more than \$300 million in PlanCon funding won't be coming.

The total that Bucks County and Eastern Montgomery County districts are being shortchanged is nearly \$10 million.

"It's a huge whack on the budget," said David Baugh, superintendent of the Centennial School District.

Centennial, owed \$965,109, is the biggest loser among Bucks County districts, followed by Council Rock at \$940,540, Central Bucks at \$928,411, Pennridge at \$864,636 and Pennsbury at \$852,536.

Though Bristol schools are owed less money than the others, its \$255,584 total is more significant because the district's \$22.4 million budget is dwarfed by the likes of Central Bucks' \$311.5 million, Council Rock's \$220.5 million and Pennsbury's \$188.1 million. The cost to each Pennsbury property owner is \$30.



(File) Construction crews clear the grounds at Quakertown Community High School in 2013. The high school campus underwent a \$72 million renovation project.

"This is very significant," said Steve Robinson, spokesman for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. "It's money that districts were counting on."

Souderton Superintendent Frank Gallagher said it was unfortunate the governor decided not to fund PlanCon.

"School districts across the commonwealth passed balanced budgets by June 30th, 2015. It is now April 2016 and we find out we are not getting the PlanCon reimbursement to keep our budgets balanced. I just do not understand the logic and it is all at the expense of our local taxpayers and public school children."

PlanCon funding is more than a one-year problem. Quakertown and Souderton report they're still owed money from prior years.

Quakertown, besides losing out on this year's \$710,602 allocation, has not received approximately \$500,000 for its \$72 million high school renovation project, according to Robert Riegel, its business manager.

He said the prior money adds \$34 to this year's \$48 for an additional \$82 tab on the tax bill of each district homeowner.

In Souderton, the district is due \$390,000 for construction debt paid down last year, said Bill Stone, business manager. Most of the debt is for its new high school, which opened in 2009.

Robinson, the PSBA spokesman, said \$1.7 billion is owed to districts from the past several years. When combined with the state's failure to meet its budget deadline of June 30, the result has been devastating to districts, he said.

"They've been stringing things together for nine months," he said. "Borrowing money, cutting programs, drawing down their fund balance."

Robinson said if the state doesn't meet its deadline for a 2016-17 spending plan by June 30 "or soon thereafter, districts aren't going to be able to last as long."

"You can't replace that (fund balance) overnight. It takes years for them to build up. Just because a budget is in place doesn't mean everything is back to normal. Districts have been wounded and hit hard. They're trying to pick up the pieces and thinking about going forward. I think you quickly see districts come much closer to closing if it gets much past the deadline of June 30."

Wolf said his fiscal code veto was necessary because of a nearly \$2 billion state deficit, which needed to be addressed before money could be borrowed to address PlanCon funding. He is seeking tax increases on sales and income to pay for it. Republicans in the House and Senate have refused to budge on the issue.

Baugh, Centennial's superintendent, sides with the governor. "Harrisburg has this massive structural deficit that they refuse to deal with," he said. "They have not addressed revenues appropriately in years.

"They keep getting re-elected on a no-new-tax platform while forcing the local governing bodies to raise taxes just to keep the lights on. This is a great state, but they're not funding the government properly. ... They leave us holding the bag."