

Talbot urged to add school funds

By STEVE NERY

News Editor

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EASTON—Several people asked the Talbot County Council to reconsider its education funding at a public hearing on the budget Tuesday afternoon, while others asked for additional funding for the health department, Chesapeake College and after-school programs.

The afternoon hearing was the first of two scheduled Tuesday on the proposed budget for fiscal year 2009. In past years, the night-time sessions have attracted more input, as the day session is typically held during working hours (see Thursday's newspaper for coverage of the later hearing).

Before the public hearing began, County Manager R. Andrew Hollis played a recorded "budget message" summarizing the proposed \$81.5 million budget. At 44.9 cents per \$100 of assessed value, the Talbot County property tax rate is expected to be 25 cents lower than any other county in the state, according to a chart Hollis showed on the projection screen.

The income tax, at 2.25 percent, is expected to be the second-lowest in the state, higher only than Worcester County.

Hollis highlighted two new positions at the sheriff's office, two new positions at Emergency Management and six new positions at Emergency Medical Services funded in the draft budget.

He spoke of the uncertainty moving forward concerning county revenues, especially pertaining to the recordation tax, the transfer tax and impact development fees as the housing market takes a turn for the worse. While FY08 income taxes are now projected to bring in \$7.2 million more than the \$23.4 million originally forecast, Hollis emphasized that too could change.

In a likely precursor to the later meeting, eight people asked the council for more money for education, while Talbot County Taxpayers Association President Owen Wormser supported specific

programs but asked for the council to trim the board of education's overall budget.

The council has proposed funding the board of education with \$33.8 million for operating costs, \$3.2 million short of the school board's request, but \$2.1 million more than the school board received in operating costs in FY08 (the council would also fund another \$3.8 million in debt service, bringing the total school board funding to \$37.6 million). That funding does not include money for the 1-to-1 Laptop Initiative or for six universal pre-kindergarten positions sought by the schools, and only covers a 3.5 percent raise for teachers plus a 1.6 percent step increase, whereas the school board requested a 7 percent raise with a step.

Council President Philip Carey Foster pointed out that based on corrected figures from the Maryland State Teachers Association, Talbot no longer ranks last in the state in terms of career earnings. With corrected figures, the amount Talbot teachers make over the course of 30 years actually ranks 18th, not 24th.

Among the public testimony:

- Wormser said the taxpayer association has two major concerns with the budget the overall school board budget as well as \$6 million authorized for a new gymnasium at Talbot County Community Center in the FY08 budget. He supported the laptop program, which provides all ninth-grade students with a computer to use in and out of school, as well as a larger raise for teachers, but said the overall budget is "excessive."

Wormser suggested Talbot County Public Schools could outsource work such as laptop maintenance as a way to save money. He also said the school system is becoming top-heavy with administrators and non-classroom employees. As for the gymnasium, he said there's been no documented need.

- Easton High School President Kelly Griffith also spoke up for both the laptop program and a larger raise for teachers, but disagreed with Wormser about the administration.

"We need teachers. We need good, quality teachers," Griffith said, adding how difficult recruiting can be in an expensive place to live.

"I really don't think we have any extra administrators in the building," she said regarding Wormser's remarks.

- Bob Blades and Donna Hacker of the Talbot Family Network supported the school budget, especially the request for universal pre-kindergarten funding.

- Mary Reeser, the president of Talbot County Public Schools Retired Personnel Association, spoke in favor of the laptop program, universal pre-kindergarten funding and teacher raises.

Despite the county's overall wealth, more than 20 percent of the county's students live in poverty, Reeser said.

"You have the power to fund these three items that are so necessary to provide equality to all of our students," Reeser said.

- Chesapeake College officials asked for additional funding for the Kent Humanities Building, for which engineers have recommended a complete renovation in light of failing systems. Talbot County's contribution to the project would cover about 7 to 8 percent of the overall cost, Richard Bulman said.

In the draft budget, the county provides \$53,000 less than the \$1.55 million asked for by Chesapeake College. Students at the college will face a \$7 increase per credit hour this year, Bulman said. Talbot is one of five counties that funds the college.

- Amy Eutsey, the director of development for Easton ROCKS, asked the council for funding for before- and after-school activities. Easton ROCKS asked for \$85,000 but did not receive any money in the draft budget. The non-profit group now serves more than 500 students, Eutsey said, but is not funded through the schools.

- Susan Liebman, an Easton ROCKS board member, said the program brings activities to kids who wouldn't otherwise have that access.

- Bill MacFarland of Eastern Shore Heritage Inc. (also known as Stories of the Chesapeake) asked the county to reconsider the group's request for \$15,000. That little bit of money would go a

long way and show the county is concerned about its history, MacFarland said.

- Sarah Welch spoke in favor of more funding for the various programs maintained by the Talbot County Health Department. The health department received \$1.54 million of a requested \$1.94 million in the draft budget. Some of the funding increase, Hollis said, covers state mandates that are not funded by the state.

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