

[NOSD levy pushes tax rate up 8%](#)



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Despite \$160,000 in spending cuts, school officials say big reduction in state aids forced increase

Despite reducing spending by more than \$163,000, a divided Northern Ozaukee School Board approved a 2013-14 levy on Monday that will push school taxes 8.1% higher.

The board voted 7-2 to approve a tax levy of \$5,767,546. That represents an increase of more than \$434,000 from the 2012-13 levy.

The tax rate required to support that levy will be \$11.93 per \$1,000 of equalized value, an increase of 24 cents per \$1,000 over last year's rate.

For a home with an equalized value of \$150,000, the budget bump will mean a \$100 increase in school taxes.

District officials noted that several other Ozaukee County school districts are facing equally daunting budgets next year, including an 8.5% hike in Cedarburg and 7.6% in Grafton. Reports show 56% of districts around the state are facing reductions in state aids.

Although no residents attended the budget hearing, district officials presented a detailed explanation for the substantial increase.

Supt. Blake Feuse said the district had to deal with economic forces that shape school spending in the state.

They included a continuing decline in enrollment, reduced state aids and depressed property values.

"There is not a whole lot we can do. These are things we don't have a lot of control over," Feuse said.

Although final numbers have yet to be received, the district has tentatively been told it will get \$2.6 million in state aid — a reduction of more than \$272,000 from last year.

When counting projected reductions in other categorical aids, district officials anticipate receiving \$596,000 less in state support next year.

Adding to the challenge of keeping taxes in check, the district's assessed value dropped 5.6%. That means there is a smaller tax base over which to spread the tax levy.

Feuse said the anticipated tax rate could be reduced if the recertification numbers result in the district receiving an additional \$61,400 from the state. If those projections hold true, the tax rate would drop to \$11.83 per \$1,000.

Board members Kendall Thistle and Rick Hamm cast the only votes against the tax levy.

After the meeting, Thistle said the 8% tax hike is unacceptable.

"It is utterly disgusting to watch the board spend money like drunken sailors all year on things that have nothing at all to do with the education of our own local resident students," he said.

Thistle cited his ongoing legal battle with the school district over a berm he put up on his property, litigation which has cost more than \$100,000 before going to trial.

Thistle also pointed to the financial challenges the district has taken on in the operation of the online charter school, Wisconsin Virtual

Learning.

“Then when it is time to pay, the board bellies up to the bar and hands over the local resident tax credit card and says, ‘I think these good folks can make up where we are short,’” Thistle said.

“I know a lot of retired people and young families in our district. I can say for certain that none of them are going to be thrilled about the bag of treats that just got left on their doorstep.”

School Board President Paul Krause said Thistle’s criticism of the budget process is unwarranted, especially considering the challenging circumstances caused by reduced state aids.

“The reality is, we have decreased our budget by over \$160,000 and have rebuilt the fund balance to over \$600,000 in just over three years,” Krause said.

“This does not seem like wild spending and certainly cannot be compared to drunken sailors ... that is a very disparaging comment and should not be given any validity whatsoever. These results are only accomplished by disciplined fiscal management.”

Still, Krause said he can understand the frustration residents will feel when they see their school taxes increase.

“In the end, nobody likes to have an increase to the levy and the administration, along with board input, is continually exploring ways to adjust the budget so the levy numbers can go down,” he said.

Although the board adopted the tax levy, they put off adopting the budget until their November meeting when final numbers from the state should be available.