

## Lakeport school trustees approve tough budget cuts

Contributed by Maile Field  
 Tuesday, 18 March 2008  
 Last Updated Tuesday, 18 March 2008

LAKEPORT — “Unsustainable” is how Lakeport Unified School District Business Manager Linda Slockbower described budget cuts approved by the schools’ board of trustees Thursday.

“The governor wants to slash funding to schools at unprecedented amounts and it’s really quite scary,” she told a solemn audience of 23 teachers, staff and parents.

The board agreed unanimously to a list of money-saving cuts and adjustments topped by closure of Natural High School.

No programs there will be eliminated, but all will be relocated, Superintendent Erin Smith-Hagberg was quick to explain.

The board also agreed to eliminate three teaching positions as well as five other aide, clerical and custodial jobs throughout the district.

Smith-Hagberg and Slockbower recommended the board make the reductions in planned spending following Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s proposal to reduce the schools’ funding a net 6.5 percent following cost of living adjustments and other factors.

Slockbower said 86 percent of the district’s funding comes from the state.

The governor also is proposing to “borrow” from the schools by not paying revenues due in July until September, a move Slockbower called “devastating.”

In the third stroke of a triple-whammy, the district also is affected by declining enrollment, having lost 59 students since the beginning of the current school year, a continuation of a multi-year trend. Those students moved out of county or out of state, Smith-Hagberg said.

Lakeport’s K-12 enrollment was down to 1,668 students in February from a high of 1,918 in 2001-02, district officials reported.

With revenues apportioned by average daily attendance figures, the cuts required by enrollment declines are immediate, Slockbower explained, in an “interim” budget revision.

During a different agenda item at Thursday’s regularly scheduled meeting, Slockbower told trustees cuts would reduce the district’s balance next year (aside from legally requisite reserves) to just \$75,000. And for the 2009-10 budget, Slockbower’s figures showed a negative \$162,000 balance.

The Lakeport district has an annual budget of about \$10 million. The “permanent until revoked” state funding cut reduces that figure by almost \$700,000.

“We cannot sustain our budget two years out with this level of income,” Slockbower said.

Although no audience members made public comment on the action, school board members were vociferous.

School Board Trustee Bob Weiss called the state’s move “disgusting,” commenting that it “irritates the hell out of me” that the governor is taking away from communities to “play politics somewhere else.”

Trustee Tom Powers commented that good fiscal management in the Lakeport district in recent years has made the budget crisis easier than it would have been. “If we hadn’t been doing things right, it would be a much bleaker picture,” he said.

Trustee Robyn Stevenson encouraged people to contact the governor to complain. “The only thing we can do is be vocal,” she said.

Smith-Hagberg noted gravely that all the cuts were valuable and that in recent years the “easier” budget cuts had already been made. She noted that the middle schools combined last year to eliminate a principal position.

The superintendent described the process behind the recommendations as “very uncomfortable.”

Smith-Hagberg — who has two children in the district where she has been a student, a teacher and a principal — said she solicited anonymous suggestions from staff via email and presented those ideas to a budget committee made up of teachers, parents, administrators and site representatives.

That committee prioritized potential cuts, which were then reviewed by Smith-Hagberg. The superintendent then compared positions of district staff to those of three other districts of similar size before submitting her proposed cuts to the school board. She noted her own office staff numbers one fewer than the other comparable districts.

The approximately 20 cuts, which range from elimination of a basketball league for third- through sixth-graders to transportation for athletic and band groups, as well as a districtwide reduction in material and supply budgets, are not simple.

Smith-Hagberg described the shuffling of duties and program restructuring as a “reorganization of the educational community.”

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