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News

District's Budget Panel Identifying Cost Savings

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WEST GOSHEN — On Thursday evening, West Chester Area School District Superintendent Dr. Jim Scanlon gave district residents an update on the progress of the Community Budget Task Force.

The task force, Scanlon said, is well on its way to identifying \$4.9 million in cuts to the school district's 2010-11 budget.

The task force consists of about 125 district residents and was formed in September. The school board charged it with recommending \$4.9 million in budget reductions, which represent 2.9 percent of the spending plan.

The task force will present its recommendations, which are nonbinding, to the full school board in December. Board members will then take the recommendations into consideration when forming next year's budget.

Scanlon said that the task force will give the school board a valuable head-start on the budget.

For board members, the process of identifying and agreeing on cuts can be heated and emotional, Scanlon said. If they have a list of community-recommended cuts from which to work, budgeting will go more smoothly.

Scanlon, who joined the West Chester Area School District in July, formerly headed Delaware's Brandywine School District. He said he ran a successful citizen budget task force in that district.

Scanlon has directed the West Chester Area task force members to make sure that their suggested cuts are "neither outlandish nor illegal."

He said that the district could legally cut all bus service, but doing so would be outlandish. And, he said, many faculty members jobs are legally protected, so laying them off is not an option.

He also advised task force members to come up with "impact statements" - predictions about how their suggested cuts would affect education.

And, Scanlon said, increasing class size or otherwise impacting the "integrity of the classroom" is off the table.

The task force has met three times so far, and has been working in subcommittees of 20 to 25 members.

At Thursday night's meeting, Scanlon reviewed some of the recommendations the subcommittees have developed with the public. For example:

The transportation subcommittee recommended that the elementary schools develop a two-tiered bell schedule, which means that some schools would start later than others. This would allow school buses to do two morning runs, and could save between \$150,000 and \$300,000 in bus costs.

The secondary education subcommittee recommended reducing the number of assistant principals at each high school, which would bring a savings of \$390,000. Assistant principals are responsible for, among other things, conducting classroom observations, overseeing the curriculum in various subject areas, and disciplining students.

The technology subcommittee recommended leasing Microsoft Office software rather than buying it. This would make updating software less costly and would save \$100,000. But if the district ever found itself unable to pay the leases, it would lose access to all Microsoft Office software.

If it bought the software and later found itself unable to update the software, it would at least be able to use old versions of the software.

The Energy and Facilities subcommittee recommended increasing the fees that outside groups must pay to rent event space in district schools. This could generate \$130,000 in revenue.

The special education subcommittee recommended the district stop purchasing special education services from outside vendors. If it started an in-house alternative education program, it could save about \$150,000.

All of these savings predictions were provided by the school district. The Daily Local News did not independently verify the accuracy of these estimations.