School Board Makes Pitch For Full Funding

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

There was only one item on the agenda for the joint work session between the Kodiak Island Borough Assembly and Board of Education last night – the school district’s budget. The board passed a $48.7 million budget during Monday’s regular meeting, which included a $10.6 million funding request from the borough.

That’s the state-allowed maximum, and the borough has only been funding about 96 percent of it in recent years. But as School Board President Melissa Borton said, less funding from state and federal sources has forced the district to request the additional $400,000 to meet the state cap.

-- (School Boro WS 1 :14 “Now we’re in a position where we’re reducing programs and working hard to maintain small class sizes and maintain programs. And we’re struggling. This is the first year I can say we’re really, really struggling.”)

The district receives 62 percent of its operational revenue from the state. This year, that total came in at $34.3 million. But a last minute piece of legislation could send about $450,000 more to Kodiak. That money wasn’t included in the budget passed on Monday, or the request to the borough last night. Chief Business Officer Lisa Pearce said that’s because there are still a lot of questions regarding how they can be used.

-- (School Boro WS 2 :26 “Not because we were trying to hide them at all, but mainly because we didn’t’ want to put them into a document and have it appear that all of a sudden we have another $400,000 when it was made very, very clear by the legislators in a very forceful manner that these are to be considered one time funds, not operational funds and we should not plan to utilize them for any time of a reoccurring, or type of expense that is going to require some sort of sustainability.”)

She said the budget bill amendment came through during the last day of the legislative session and appropriates an additional $21 million to schools based on their student enrollment numbers.

-- (School Boro WS 3 :24 “Each district was to use the funds for, and it’s underlined there, it’s verbatim out of the amendment, they were to be used for student safety and security enhancement, for fixed cost and energy relief. Now that is the classification for districts that have an average daily membership of 4,500 or less, which Kodiak falls under that. So we would have that additional flexibility.”)

Ideally, Pearce said the district would put the funds to energy costs and free up other money in the budget. But that falls under operational costs, which districts were advised not to use the money for.

Other districts across the state are also

confused about the expectation for the funds, and the matter has gone to the attorney general for clarification. In the meantime, the district opted to leave the numbers out.

Back to the budget. The district approached this budget cycle through attrition. As staff members retired or resigned, specialty teachers were moved into those roles to keep class sizes down. Faculty sharing between the Middle and High School helped ease the loss of teachers, but the same wasn’t so for elementary schools. The additional $400,000 the district is requesting from the borough would pay for new hires in primary grades and help keep class sizes low.

There was little discussion on the budget, but Assemblywoman Carol Austerman cut to the chase.

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(School Boro WS 4 :28 “And so how many teachers is $399,000? A little less than four. It would be four. We would find a way to make it four.”)

That was Superintendent Stewart McDonald saying the additional funding request would fund four full time teachers in the elementary schools.

The borough assembly will review the funding request during its work session on May 9 and put it to a vote during its regular meeting on May 16.