Assembly Seemingly Split on School Funding

Friday, 10 May 2013

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/school_funding.mp3{/audio}

Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

Last month the Board of Education passed a $48.7 million budget, 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. During a joint work session with the Kodiak Island Borough Assembly in April, School Board President Melissa Borton explained that less funding from state and federal sources forced the district to request the additional $400,000 to meet the state cap. There was little discussion on the matter then, but last night the borough assembly revisited the topic during its work session.

Assemblyman Tuck Bonney kicked the discussion off by saying he supported funding to the cap.

“My job, I look at it as an assembly member, is to fund the school as well as I can without harming the economy of Kodiak. We have the money to go to the cap, I don’t have any problem going to the cap because we have the money. If we didn’t have the money I wouldn’t say that,” Bonney said.

Assemblywoman Carol Austerman asked the district’s chief business officer, Lisa Pearce, whether or not the board had considered what to do with the last minute legislative funding that was mentioned during the joint work session in April.

On the last day of session a bill was passed that allocated $21 million to districts around the state. Kodiak’s piece of the pie is about $450,000. Districts that have an average daily membership of 4,500, which Kodiak does, can put the money toward fixed costs and energy relief.

During last night’s work session, Pearce said the district only recently received clarification on what that money could be used for, so where to implement it hadn’t been discussed by the school board.

Austerman said that was understandable, and shared her hopes for where the money would go.

“My hope would be that if that $446,00 can now be put into say energy costs, that then that will

free up another $446,000 that you can put back into other funds and then if the assembly was then to take you guys to the cap, my hope would be that then there would be teachers coming back," she said. "And so what I don’t want to see is that now there’s this extra $400,000 that’s available for the school district, and then we were to give you the additional $400,000 as well and then we would still be hearing that teachers are still being cut.”

Superintendent Stewart McDonald said it would be out of line for him to give any sort of guarantee about where the money would go, simply because the school board hasn’t discussed the matter. That conversation is scheduled for the next board of education work session in June.

That was a problem for Assemblywoman Louise Stutes, who pointed out that the borough assembly is set to vote on the district’s funding amount next week.

“I’m going to be forced to vote against it unless we know where the money’s going to be going or if it’s going back to teachers.”

Assemblywoman Chris Lynch disagreed. She said she supported funding to the cap, and didn’t think it was the assembly’s place to direct where the district spends its money.

“I fully support funding to the cap, we have the money this year and technically it’s not our job to tell them how to spend money. So to say no because we don’t get any assurances, I don’t find that to be a good decision.”

As of last night, the assembly is seemingly split on how to fund the school district this year. Assemblyman Dave Kaplan came out in favor of full funding, but Assemblyman Mel Stephens said he would not support it. Austerman didn’t say where she fell on the matter and Assemblyman Aaron Griffin was absent.

The matter remains on the agenda for next week’s regular meeting, and will be put to a vote. If the assembly remains split then, the ultimate decision will go to Borough Mayor Jerome Selby, who is charged with any tie-breaking vote.