Assembly Decides to Fund Schools to Cap

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

The funding wishes of the Kodiak Island Borough School District were granted last night. The borough assembly voted 5-2 in favor of funding the district’s $10.6 million request, which is the state allowed maximum. In recent years the assembly has only funded about 96 percent of that, but low state and federal contributions forced the district to ask for full funding.

The close vote boiled down to some assembly members’ disappointment in the district’s lack of communication about additional funds. On the last day of the legislative session a bill was passed that allocated $21 million to districts around the state. Kodiak’s piece of the pie is about $450,000, and it was determined that those funds could be put toward energy saving costs and free up other dollars in the district’s $48.7 million budget. A few assembly members, one being Assemblywoman Carol Austerman, wanted to know where those free dollars would go.

-- (Borough Meeting 1 :35 “And part of our reason for the interest is because it is a very close amount to the difference of this $399,000 that is between flat funding the school district this year and funding to the cap, from the assembly. So it was of concern to us because we wanted to understand how, especially if they got both sets of funding, what that was going to do. And my main question, and I believe a couple other assembly members at the work session, was is it going to put teachers back in the classroom that weren’t there otherwise.”)

Austerman said she walked into the meeting in favor of full funding, but the lack of communication from the district left her unsure how to vote. The answer to her question about the extra funding wasn’t provided before last night’s meeting, nor was it given during community comments or the public hearing on the matter.

Only during assembly discussion, when Assemblyman Aaron Griffin called Superintendent Stewart McDonald to the podium, was it clear where the funds would go. McDonald said $75,000 of the $450,000 will go toward school security improvements, with the rest going to energy costs. He said that will free up funds for other areas of the budget, like $165,000 now going toward curriculum materials.

-- (Borough Meeting 2 :22 “The remaining $206,000 goes into salary contingencies, specifically to address things like as student enrollment comes in in august, to keep our pupil/teacher ratios intact. To be able to have that money to place teachers where we need them as student enrollment comes in in August.”)

Assemblywoman Louise Stutes said she would be voting against the amended funding amount.

-- (Borough Meeting 3 :32 “I just don’t believe in spending every

last dime you have. But more importantly, I have to agree with Mrs. Austerman. The school budget is the number one item on the plate of the school district at this time. And for them to be so inattentive so as to not respond to the assembly’s questions, when they’re here asking us to fund them to the cap, that should be their number one priority, and it simply was not for some reason. And I will not be supporting this motion, I just can’t.”)

Assemblyman Aaron Griffin made the motion to amend the funding amount to the cap. He said he fully supports that dollar amount, regardless of intergovernmental communication.

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(Borough Meeting 4 :18 “It’s the right thing to do when we have the money. A large portion of this is coming from taxes that we’ve already collected specifically earmarked for the school district anyway. And we are forwarding that to them. To me it makes sense to continue to uphold the quality of the education system here in Kodiak.”)

The vote on the amendment to increase the district’s funding passed 4-to-3, with Austerman, Stephens and Stutes voting against it. The final measure cleared the assembly 5-to-2, with just Stephens and Stutes dissenting.

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