

APRIL 29, 2016, 6:43 PM

LAST UPDATED: FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 2016, 6:43 PM

Ridgefield voters will decide on expanded school budget to hire more staff

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RIDGEFIELD -- Voters not only will cast ballots for the next U.S. president and local elected officials in November, they also will decide whether the school district should expand its annual base budget by \$1.14 million to pay for additional staff.

The Board of Education on Thursday approved the question to be placed on the Nov. 8 ballot. If approved by the voters, the majority of the funds would go toward personnel costs.

Superintendent of Schools Frank Romano said that if approved the question would cost the owners of a home assessed at \$389,090, the borough average, a little more than \$270 a year, or about 75 cents a day.

"The bottom line is Ridgefield students have not had the same opportunities, same resources that kids in many other places have for a long time," Romano said Friday. "This is a plan for bringing them those opportunities, those programs."

If approved, the proposal would allow the district to hire teachers in science, business, world language, math, social studies, and English language learning, according to a handout made available at the school board meeting. The money would also be used to pay for two more guidance counselors, two media specialists and one more maintenance worker.

Funds also would be set aside to develop a maintenance and facilities program for the district's aging buildings.

"We need to better sustain our educational environments," the handout reads. "Building wear-and-tear increases with each passing year. Classrooms share increasing fundamental needs such as but not limited to replacement desks and chairs and carpeting repairs."

In a presentation to trustees and community members at Tuesday's meeting, Romano said that years of zero budget increase and 2 percent caps tax levies left the district with less personnel.

He said that when he first arrived nearly two years ago he noticed that the district graduated 135 eighth grade students that year, and in September, only 99 of them returned to Ridgefield Memorial High School.

"We lose a significant number of students from eighth grade to ninth grade every year," he said, adding that several go to the Bergen County Academies in Hackensack while others go to private, independent or Catholic schools. "I want them to want to stay, I want them to be excited about coming to Ridgefield Memorial High School."

He said he plans to form a committee to help him spread the word and get support for the spending. Such committees, he said, typically consist of parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and possibly students. Among the challenges that the question will face is misinformation, Romano said.

“I think the majority of the folks who are fully informed will vote ‘yes’ for this,” he said.

On Thursday, Romano and Business Administrator Richard Guarini also gave a presentation on the district’s 2016-17 spending plan, which had its final hearing. The \$38.3 million budget is 5.1 percent higher than the current year’s spending plan, and relies on \$19.9 million to be raised in property taxes, which is about 3.8 percent higher than the current year.

Those figures mean that the homeowner of property assessed at the borough average would pay \$185.57 more a year in school taxes.

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