

HENDERSON INDEPENDENT

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The Henderson City Council moved forward to replace a police officer vacancy, but not without some debate last week.

Wrestling wins again

The Giants wrestling team earned a big win over the Jayhawks last Friday. P. 15



Deb Schaefer closes the books on banking career

First State Bank in Henderson said good-bye to Schaefer after 22+ years. P.13

Budget deficit pits staff against space

With \$700,000 deficit looming, school board considers closing Hilltop

By Rachel Miller
Editor

The Le Sueur-Henderson School Board has a tough financial path to navigate and no easy solutions. The board was presented with some tough projections during its Tuesday, Feb. 16 work session, chief among them an estimated \$700,000 budget deficit going into the 2021-22 school year.

With such a large deficit, due primarily to continued declining enrollment and decreasing state aid, the board was presented with two options to bring costs down: cut staff and increase class sizes, or close Hilltop Elementary School and shift students to Park Elementary, which has more space.

Both options will create hardships, and neither will completely address the deficit.

The option to close Hilltop is estimated to save the district \$253,600, while reducing the teaching staff is estimated to save \$275,000.

A third option was brought up by board member Joe Roby, although he acknowledged he did not think it would be viable or responsible: pass a “really exceptional operating levy” to close the gap.

In 2017, the board passed a \$100/per pupil operating levy. A \$500/pupil levy would generate roughly \$516,000 for the district, which again, wouldn’t completely solve the district’s problems, and could generate some new ones.

Le Sueur-Henderson Business Manager Ky Battern pointed out that if the district asks for a hefty operating referendum, it will likely make it much harder to turn around and ask for a building referendum.

“If we ask for a building and five times the operating levy, we are going to have some really unhappy taxpayers,” board member Gretchen Rehm agreed.

Regardless of which option the board goes with, they do have \$298,000 of reductions they are

BUDGET DEFICIT
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PHOTO BY RACHEL MILLER

Hilltop Elementary School students get ready to head home on Monday afternoon. The future of the school is once again up in the air as the district has to contend with a \$700,000 deficit.

COVID-19 Update

The state saw a 27 percent reduction in deaths in the past week.
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Park water woes continue

Park Elementary School suffered more water damage on Christmas Day, which cost more than \$21,000 to repair.
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The kids are back in school

After almost a year, all LS-H students are back to in-person learning.
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School district denies bus contract

The LS-H School Board will be exploring new transportation options for the 2021-22 school year.
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Basketball

Despite suffering losses, the Giants showed big improvement last week.
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Henderson City Council

Debate involves budget and police department new hires

By Beth Cornish
Independent staff

Henderson Chief of Police Dmitri Ikonitski presented a very straightforward report on the last month’s police activity and then stirred up an active discussion when he reached the personnel portion of his report during the Henderson City Council meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 17.

Chief Ikonitski asked for the council’s approval to change Alex Schmidt from full time to part time status as Schmidt has accepted a full time position with the Gaylord Police Department.

Schmidt has been a full time officer with the HPD, with 25 percent of his time spent on monitoring activities for the water and sewer department. (These actions were previously handled by personnel from Le Sueur at a cost of \$80-100 per hour, so keeping this in house is a significant savings and was part of the justification for previously moving Schmidt from part time to full time.) Until a replacement is hired, Schmidt will continue his monitoring duties.

Ikonitski updated the council on the new hiring process, sharing that he has offered positions to two new officers, one full time, Jason Lenertz, to replace Schmidt,

and one part time, Eric Karels, to serve only as backup coverage for events such as the roll-ins, holidays, and sick leave, both offers contingent upon the candidates successfully completing psychological and physical testing.

The candidates both have ties to Henderson as Lenertz is an MNCS graduate and has been working as a correction officer at the Sibley County Jail. He served in the U. S. Army and was an MP. Karels has previous experience of about 18 years with the HPD and has been working with the sex offenders program in St. Peter. In Ikonitski’s opinion, both would be good additions to the department.

The debate swirled around beginning with funding sources for the new full time officer and whether he should be offered the same hourly wage as Schmidt or start at a lower wage. Some of the council members misread a bank reconciliation report as a projection report and thought the city was projecting a deficit for the end of 2021. There was a \$562,069.02 deficit at the beginning of December 2020 prior to the receipt of the bond funds to pay for projects from the last four years. The ending balance for January 2021 is

DEBATE
CONTINUED ON PAGE 3



Water woes continue to wage at Park Elementary

By Rachel Miller
Editor

As the Le Sueur-Henderson School District prepares for a tough decision to address its budget concerns, Park Elementary School in Le Sueur continues to experience issues.

On Christmas Day, school staff and the Le Sueur Fire Department responded to Park Elementary after a sprinkler head broke and sent water cascading down the kindergarten/preschool wing.

The fire department helped squeegee and clear out the water, and then the district used fans and dehumidifiers to dry the classroom walls.

According to Buildings and Grounds Supervisor Todd Vrklan, they also had to do some tile work because the water damaged sheet-rock behind the tile. Luckily, there

was no mold or mildew problems due to the speed with which the break was reported and fixed.

Vrklan said the sprinkler head breaking was due to the storm that traveled through the area in the days before. The storm caused a power outage that turned off an exhaust fan motor, which in turn allowed cold air in the building, which froze the sprinkler head, Vrklan said.

Students were due to return to school on Jan. 13, and Vrklan reported his crew had the leak and repairs primarily done by Friday, Jan. 8.

When all was said and done, the incident cost more than \$21,000 to fix. The district paid SERVPRO of Mankato/Owatonna \$15,239.22 for water restoration, and another \$6,348 to WTG Terrazzo & Tile in Burnsville for wall tile patching work.



PHOTO BY RACHEL MILLER

Jim Wagner tours Le Sueur-Henderson

Jim Wagner (right), who is in negotiations to take over as the incoming Le Sueur-Henderson Superintendent, arrived in town on Friday, Feb. 19 for a tour of district facilities. MS/HS Principal Brian Thorstad (left) led Wagner on the middle/high school tour. Wagner had a chance to see some of the classrooms including Robert Steiger's social studies room (above) and Jennifer Hovick's health room, the auditorium, the Industrial Tech wing, the weight room and gyms.

BUDGET DEFICIT

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planning, which include:

- Shift payroll responsibilities to the Business Manager, saving \$35,000;
- Move repair maintenance from the General budget to Long-Term Facilities Maintenance, saving \$34,000;
- Lower the utility budget by \$40,000. The current budget was based off costs from two years ago, when the costs were abnormally high;
- Reduce the Transportation budget by \$120,000 with a more competitive contract (see related story on page 13);
- Reduce the Tech budget by \$49,000. The majority of this will be through the E-Rate program which offers telecommunications, Internet access and internal connections discounts to eligible schools and libraries. The district is eligible for a 60 percent discount; and
- Commit to a November referendum date, thus saving \$20,000 by not needing to hold a special election.

BUDGET OPTION 1: CUT STAFF

The board could save \$275,000 by eliminating five full-time staff members from the elementary school level, and cutting American Sign Language (ASL) from the budget.

Doing so would drastically increase most elementary class sizes, as grades 2-5 would drop from three sections to two.

Kindergarten would increase slightly, from 18 to 20 kids per section, and first grade would increase from 17 to 19 kids per classroom. The other grades

Option 1: Reduce Staff, Increase Class Sizes

Hilltop stays open

- Reduce one second-grade teacher, saving \$51,000
- Reduce one third-grade teacher, saving \$51,000
- Reduce one fourth-grade teacher, saving \$51,000
- Reduce one fifth-grade teacher, saving \$51,000
- Reduce Curriculum and Instruction TOSA, saving \$51,000
- Remove American Sign Language, saving \$20,000

TOTAL SAVINGS: \$275,000

would increase as follows:

- Second grade: Increase from 18 to 25 kids per class
- Third grade: Increase from 20 to 26 kids per class
- Fourth grade: Increase from 21 to 30 kids per class
- Fifth grade: Increase from 21 to 32 kids per class

Superintendent Marlene Johnson is currently working on obtaining class sizes for neighboring districts, but she did share that increasing class sizes will limit a teacher's ability to do personalized learning.

Roby was also concerned about the impact of increasing class sizes by 50 percent in fourth and fifth grade at Hilltop.

"That is a figure that impacts every teacher, every student and every parent in this community, and that is just shocking," Roby said.

BUDGET OPTION 2: CLOSE HILLTOP

The district could save \$253,600 by closing Hilltop Elementary

School in Henderson and making some staffing changes as a result.

Consolidating would allow the district to maximize staff case loads, resulting in not needing one of its Special Education teachers, a ELL/Special Ed para and Technology para. The principal would take on the curriculum part of the existing Curriculum and Instruction TOSA position, and the TOSA would go into the classroom.

The district would also see savings in the areas of utilities, repairs/maintenance, transportation and staff travel time between buildings.

The board did also have the option of reducing a principal and shifting to a Dean of Students, but that was not preferred as staff felt it would be less effective and more disruptive, and it would actually have less savings.

It was also pointed out that due to the district's "last in, first out" policy, doing so would eliminate MS/HS Principal Brian Thorstad, as both Christine McDonald and

Option 2: Close Hilltop Elementary School

- Reduce one health assistant, saving \$18,000;
- Shift Curriculum from the Curriculum and Instruction TOSA to the principal, and have the TOSA in a classroom, saving \$51,000;
- Reduce one Special Ed. teacher, saving \$51,000;
- Reduce one ELL/Special Ed para, saving \$20,000;
- Reduce one Technology para, saving \$20,000;
- Reduce one bus route (could possibly be two), saving \$48,000 per route;
- Reduce Hilltop utilities 50 percent, saving \$27,000;
- Save \$13,000 on Hilltop repair and maintenance; and
- Save \$5,600 in travel reimbursement for seven staff members between buildings.

TOTAL SAVINGS: \$253,600

Amanda Feterl have been employed longer.

It was pointed out that even if the board decides to close Hilltop, it does not exclude the Hilltop site from being considered as a school site as the district moves forward with a building referendum.

As it stands, there is space at Park Elementary School to accommodate fourth and fifth-grade students, but Hilltop does not have existing space to take on K-3 students.

"It is a hard one to swallow for anybody from Henderson," Superintendent Johnson said.

Rehm acknowledged the same, but did not feel it would be acceptable to put kids into larger class sizes. Rehm said closing Hilltop will probably result in more declining enrollment as some Henderson parents will probably open enroll out, but she felt bigger class sizes would result in even more parents sending their kids elsewhere.

Board member Brian Sorenson,

who also lives in Henderson, said it will be an uphill battle in the local community, but pointed out his daughter's fifth-grade class was 30-31 kids in a classroom last year, and it was not a pleasant experience.

"Cutting people is not a pleasant thing to do, especially when it explodes the classroom sizes," Sorenson said.

Doing nothing isn't an option either. The district has about \$1 million in its fund balance right now, and just taking money to fill the deficit will push the problem out for a year, while eliminating the district's safety net.

With no perfect solutions that will make everybody happy viable, the board will have to make the best of a bad solution. As they are preparing to take the issue up on its Monday, March 1 agenda, board member Matt Hathaway said they should bear in mind their mission, which Board Chair Brig- id Tuck pointed out puts students as the priority.