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School Budget Vote Report: Increase in Overrides and Decrease in Voter Turnout

The New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO) has released its annual School District Budget Votes report, which analyzes data from the State Education Department regarding school budget votes that occurred across the state on May 17 and the nine re-votes that occurred on June 21.

This year, 99 percent of budgets passed at the first opportunity— that continued a trend of passage rates above 90% that started with the advent of the Great Recession. However, this year saw a jump in the number of attempted tax-cap overrides—36 attempts in the May vote, up from 19 last year.

This jump is likely due to a record-low tax cap for 2016. The cap is tied to two percent or the Consumer Price Index (CPI), whichever is less. The CPI for this year's calculation came in at .12 percent, or 12 hundredths of a percent. When that number is factored in to the tax cap calculation, we saw a record number of tax caps near or below zero.

This year, 86 districts faced a negative tax cap, meaning they had to raise less than they had the year prior, or obtain 60 percent voter approval to do otherwise. Nineteen of those districts sought to override the cap.

Ten district budget votes were defeated at the first vote, and one district chose a contingency budget rather than holding a re-vote. Of the nine districts that went to a re-vote, three were defeated, which were all again seeking a tax cap override.

The number of voters continues to drop, with only about 578,000 voters this year in contrast with 586,647 voters last year and a high of 982,000 voters in 2010 (a decrease of 40% between 2010-2016). This number has been declining steadily for a number of years and continued further since the advent of the tax cap in 2012.

While high need rural districts continue to seek the most overrides, this year saw an unusually high number of districts in average and low need districts seeking overrides, likely due to the low tax cap. The greatest number of overrides sought was in the Southern Tier region, which also saw the greatest number of school district budget defeats.

“This year’s near-zero tax cap forced districts to seek overrides just to make minimal levy increases, or even to avoid a negative tax cap. Districts should not have to achieve supermajority approval to meet such modest requests,” says NSYASBO Executive Director Michael Borges. “NYSASBO has called for the state to make the tax cap a flat 2% with a floor of zero, so no school district faces a negative tax cap. We also continue to ask that the state implement the commonsense changes to the cap that were approved in 2015 but never implemented. Such modifications would ensure that students receive the support they need at a cost taxpayers can afford.”

Visit NYSASBO’s website at www.nysasbo.org/reports to download the 2016 School Budget Votes Report.