

Scotia-Glenville school board split over exceeding tax cap

By [Zachary Matson](#) March 16, 2016

Scotia-Glenville school board members Monday night were split over whether to take a budget to voters in May that exceeds the district's tax cap of 1.78 percent — or nearly \$200,000.

The tax cap represents the amount of money the district can raise from local taxpayers over last year's local tax levy without needing 60 percent approval on its budget. Board members weighed the merits of presenting a budget they said would meet the needs of the district with concerns over facing anti-tax backlash and voter rejection.

Superintendent Susan Swartz presented the board with a series of budget options at its meeting Monday night, including a plan to provide middle school special needs students with intensive instruction, creating a "time-out" room at Sacandaga Elementary School, restoring school fields trips and adding either a reading teacher or art and music teacher.

But once the district adds all of the proposals together, it begins to push over the tax levy limit, according to the budget presentation Swartz made to the board. (The district's funding picture could change once the Legislature finalizes its own spending plan later this month.)

While some of the board members argued that it was important to fund most all of Swartz's proposals, another group of members were concerned voters would react negatively to exceeding the tax limit, especially so soon after a proposed land purchase was roundly rejected by voters in February.

"I have the feeling that this is a year where we would find it tough or unappreciative to go over the limit," board member Bill Pytlovaný said. "I think we will have more people paying attention and wanting us to keep the taxes down low."

Voters last month shot down a \$999,000 proposal to buy a 7.3-acre parcel of land adjacent to the high school with over 70 percent in opposition.

But a few of the board members argued that rejection of the land buy was more about the district's lack of a specific plan for the property than any program or budgetary concerns. If the district could communicate why it was important to invest in a special needs middle school program or to hire a reading teacher, enough voters would support the budget, some of members said.

Board member Gary Normington made the point that hiring a reading teacher could go a long way in eliminating literacy problems that would require intensive remediation and special education with students in the future, possibly saving money in the long run.

"We have to stop looking at fixing problems now and get to the point of eliminating problems from happening in the future," Normington said. "I don't think we can go out and present something that we scaled back because we are afraid of getting a no vote."

Board member Pam Carbone joined Normington in calling for a more robust budget request, suggesting a tax levy increase of around 2.5 percent would let the district fund a new teacher and administrator, create the middle school special needs program, establish a "time-out" room, restore field trips and meet contractual obligations of providing sabbatical leave.

But board members Daniel Feinberg and Thomas Beauchamp shared concerns about going to voters with a budget that busted the tax cap. The other two board members agreed with points on both sides of the tax cap divide.

“I want to put the best budget out there for the children, but I’ve lived through a no vote, and there is nothing more disruptive on your community,” Board President David Bucciferro said.

Scotia-Glenville isn’t the only district in the state wrestling with a lower-than-usual tax cap. When districts submitted preliminary budget figure to state comptroller at the beginning of the month, over 35 districts across the state indicated they were considering exceeding their tax cap, according to an analysis from the New York State Association of School Business Officials.

Michael Borges, director of the business officials groups, said with low tax caps — which are largely driven by inflation rates, at .12 percent for the past year — districts are counting on increased funding from state lawmakers or increases from local taxpayers to maintain staffing and program levels.

Schenectady and Schalmont schools both face tax caps of less than 1 percent this budget season. Schenectady Superintendent Larry Spring has said he does not plan on recommending the Schenectady school board exceed its tax cap.

“(Districts) need to make a case regardless of whether they are going for a [tax cap] override or not that the funds are needed to continue or improve the quality of the public education system,” Borges said. “It’s an investment in our children and in our future.”

Ultimately, Swartz said she would rework the budget proposals and return to the board with more specific options at its Monday night meeting. The board is required to finalize its budget next month and put it up for voter approval in May.

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