School Board rejects tax to fund raises

By CURT EYSINK Advocate staff writer

The East Baton Rouge Parish School Board narrowly defeated a request by support workers to put a 3-mill property tax on the May 5 ballot, angering many of them and prompting a custodian to say he’ll run for a seat on the board.

Six of the 11 board members present Thursday voted to put the 3-mill tax on the ballot, but seven votes are needed for passage. Instead, all 11 members voted to place on the ballot only the renewal of a 5.11-mill tax first past in 1987.

The tax renewal raises slightly more than $5 million annually. If the public fails to support it in May, “We’ll have a butchering job to do,” Board member Gordon Hutchinson said.

Hutchinson, like board member Lou Hines, said that putting a new tax on the ballot would jeopardize passage of the renewal, which is crucial to keeping the School Budget out of the red.

“We told the public that we were not going to come back and ask for new taxes until we had a plan . . . We don’t have a plan and the public knows we don’t have a plan,” Hines said as another reason for opposing the tax for support workers.

Hines also said that “This board will be abdicating its authority to handle public funds” by approving the support worker proposal, put forward by the Baton Rouge Association of School Employees, because it relied solely on the union’s estimation of the size of the millage.

Board member AIT Trickett began his discussion on the item by saying he could support the new tax if voters were able to vote on it separately from the renewal, but when the time came to vote, he changed his mind.

He said he wasn’t convinced three mills was the correct amount for the tax. He was opposed to the BRASE proposal of a 7 percent, across-the-board raise because it would widen the pay gap between poorly paid support personnel and well-paid support personnel, such as bus drivers, he said.

“I’m for the need. I’m very confused about the exact millage when we do not know what the exact needs are,” he said after the meeting. “Mr. Hines brought that to my attention.’

Board President Jim Talbot and members Clyde Geddes, Hines, Hutchinson and Trickett voted against the new tax. BoardmemberAITTrickettbeganahisdiscussionontheitemby

easy this time,” he said, vowing stiff opposition in School Board elections later this year for board members who voted against the tax proposal.

Roddysaid hedplans torun for the seat currently held by Geddes because support workers “don’t have enough people on the board.”

Another matter previously opposed by BRASE and several support workers passed without discussion while dozens of support workers were outside the meeting room bemoaning the fate of their tax.

The board approved a reorganization of the transportation department that includes raising the director’s salary by $2,000 and hiring two supervisors, at a total cost of about $80,000 a year.

The reorganization also calls for shifting three current
mechanics supervisors and about 35 mechanics and laborers to the transportation department from the maintenance department.

One of the two transportation supervisor positions is new. The other had been in the organizational structure but was deleted two years ago as a cost-saving measure.

"With the addition of the two supervisors, we could begin to adequately evaluate our bus drivers, return to observing the drivers on the road, and provide better training for our current drivers and substitutes," Associate Superintendent Grady Hazel said earlier in a memo.

The raise for the director position is needed to attract qualified applicants for the job, which currently is vacant, Hazel has said.

BRASE and support workers have opposed the move because it calls for greater expense on supervision at a time when the board tells them it doesn’t have the money for raises for its lower paid employees.

Geddes voted against the reorganization. He has said in the past that it creates unnecessary supervision.