IN WAKE OF TAX FAILURE, LAFAYETTE SCHOOL BOARD SCOURS BUDGET TO MEET CRITICAL FACILITIES NEEDS

AFTER DEFEAT

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On the heels of a failed tax measure for school facilities, the Lafayette Parish School Board is preparing to scour the budget for ways to begin addressing a facilities backlog estimated at $1 billion.

A proposed half-cent sales tax to fund a major school improvement plan was soundly defeated last month, with 59 percent of voters opposing it. The tax, if approved, would have funded nearly $200 million in projects aimed at eliminating more than half of the 420 temporary classrooms in the district.

The board started budget discussions last week for the upcoming fiscal year that begins July 1, and it seems likely the portable buildings will be staying put for the foreseeable future. "It's inconceivable that you could do anything large scale without some additional revenue," Superintendent Donald Aguillard said.

The board is set to meet again Tuesday to continue budget discussions. Board members asked Aguillard to come with recommendations for trimming the administration's initial $278 million general fund budget proposal, carving out about $7.5 million in anticipated revenue tied to rising sales and property taxes from an expected rebound of the local economy.

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Students and teachers navigate the maze of temporary buildings on the Plantation Elementary School's campus Friday in Lafayette. On the heels of a failed tax measure for school facilities, the Lafayette Parish School Board is preparing to scour the budget for ways to begin addressing a facilities backlog estimated at $1 billion.
Board member Justin Cen- tanni suggested setting aside the extra revenue, if it materi- alizes, to begin chipping away at portable buildings or other facility needs.

He said it seems the only vi- able option at this point, con- sidering what he interprets as a strong message from Lafayette Parish voters last month.

“They would like to see us address these needs with exist- ing funds,” Centanni said. “The voters were very clear on what they wanted from us.”

Centanni and board member Jeremy Hidalgo, both vocal ad- vocates for the failed tax mea- sure, said they can’t imagine bringing the school facilities tax proposal back to voters.

Hidalgo said the low voter turnout of 17 percent for such a well-publicized tax election made a bigger impression on him than the defeat.

“Maybe it’s not a priority,” he said.

Still, Hidalgo said, the facility needs are serious, and there is little wiggle room in the budget to address the issue without eliminating positions and student services that parents value.

“That’s just where we are. It’s not easy to start slashing and cutting,” he said.

Aguillard said the adminis- tration plans to offer a menu of recommendations next week, “from the obvious to the more painful.”

Carving out a few million dol- lars a year and setting it aside for facilities needs is a start, Aguillard said, but it will not begin to address the system’s significant backlog, which has been estimated at around $1 billion.

Hidalgo shares that view.

“The tax election or the slug- gish economy doesn’t change the need for better facilities,” he said. “We are not going to be able to get rid of many Butler (portable) buildings without additional revenue.”

Unlike Centanni and Hidalgo, Aguillard said he is not con- vinced last month’s election was a clear message to the school system, and he hopes to organize a public meeting this summer to get feedback from residents on why the tax mea- sure failed and what type of measure might find support.

“I still think we don’t know what the citizens of Lafayette want in terms of the future of facilities,” he said.

The regional economic devel- opment group One Acadiana, which actively supported the tax, also is reflecting on next steps in addressing school fa- cilities improvements that the organization has identified as a top priority.

“What’s clear from this elec- tion is that there is a large seg- ment of voters who distrust the school system,” said Jason El Koubi, One Acadiana president and CEO. “We’ve got to do a better job of communicat- ing how the school system has changed.”