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

REGROUPING AFTER DEFEAT

BY RICHARD BURGESS
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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.

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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 470 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 on a 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 budget proposal, and voting to increase anticipated revenue tied to rising sales and property taxes from an expected rebound of the local economy.

Students and teachers navigate the maze of temporary buildings at 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.

"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 administration plans to offer a menu of recommendations next week, "from the obvious to the more painful."

Carving out a few million dollars 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 sluggish economy doesn't change the need for better facilities," he said. "We are not going to be able to get rid of many of the buildings without additional revenue."

Unlike Centanni and Hidalgo, Aguillard said he is not convinced last month's election was a clear message to the school board, and he hopes to organize a public meeting to get feedback from residents on why the tax measure 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 development group One Acadiana, which actively supported the measure, is reflecting on next steps in addressing school facilities improvements that the organization has identified as a top priority.

"What's clear from this election is that there is a segment 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 communicating how the school system has changed."
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On the heels of a failed tax measure for school facilities, the Lafayette Parish School Board is preparing to move the budget for ways to begin addressing a facilities backlog estimated at $1.5 billion.

A proposed half-cent sales tax to fund a major school improvement plan was soundly defeated last month, with 55 percent of voters opposing it. The proposed tax would have generated $250 million in projects aimed at eliminating more than half of the 432 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 temporary 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.

Aguillard asked for a meeting from board members Monday to continue budget discussions.

Board members said Aguillard should come with recommendations for cutting the administration's initial $25 million general fund budget proposal, cutting out about $7.5 million in anticipated revenue tied to rising sales and property taxes from an expected rebound of the local economy.

Students and teachers navigate the maze of temporary buildings on the Plaquemine Elementary School's campus Friday in Lafayette. In the heels of a failed tax measure for school facilities, the Lafayette Parish School Board is preparing to move the budget for ways to begin addressing a facilities backlog estimated at $1 billion.

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Board member Jammie Conti- nant suggested setting aside the extra revenue, if any, for unforeseen expenses, in case a future bond measure isn't successful.

Aguillard said he will likely ask for an additional $25 million or $50 million in the 2018 fiscal year budget, depending on the final numbers.

He said the question will be a "tough sell" to voters.

"You can't promise a bond vote before the election," Aguillard said. "You can't promise that we're going to do it on a second vote, too.

"We're going to have to wait and see.""