

Published June 19, 2008 10:57 pm - Proposed massive cuts to the state's education budget have left Crawford County administrators and school boards wondering if further chaos will affect their district's bottom line.

Wrangling over state spending to blame for school budget chaos

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Proposed massive cuts to the state's education budget have left Crawford County administrators and school boards wondering if further chaos will affect their district's bottom line.

Late Monday, the state Senate approved Senate Bill 1389 which cut education funding by \$118 million, or 41 percent less than what Gov. Ed Rendell had proposed in February. The proposed cuts came less than two weeks before the state's 501 school districts are required to have their own budgets passed for the 2008-09 academic year.

In February, Rendell had proposed increasing basic education subsidies by \$291 million, or what his office touted as the "largest increase in more than two decades." He also had increased special education spending by 3 percent.

Now, less than four months later, no one knows how the cookie will crumble.

Crawford Central is the first of the three area school districts that is expected to approve its final budget during its regular school board meeting Monday at 7 p.m. at the Instructional Support Center.

As of press time Tuesday, board members were anticipating an increase in millage somewhere in the vicinity of 2.5 mills, increasing average homeowners' tax bills by \$70.75.

Crawford Central Superintendent Mike Dolecki said he's "not happy" that the state is considering substantially reducing what it proposed earlier because it will "place a hardship on the school districts educationally, and on the taxpayers."

Crawford Central was in a unique situation because it had petitioned the state to increase its subsidies due to an error in its initial formula.

"For 2008-2009 we scheduled a 1.5 percent subsidy increase in the revenue part of our budget," Dolecki said. "But after petitioning the state for a 2.5 percent increase we felt comfortable that it was going to happen. But now that the Legislature is throwing a curve ball at us, we're developing concerns that it may not."

In PENNCREST School District, a millage increase is definitely on the horizon, but just how much is still unknown. During a recent work session, proposed hikes ranged wildly from a half-mill increase to 2 mills. The school board will hold a special budget meeting Thursday at

7 p.m. where it hopes to hammer out a final figure. Depending on the millage hike, the average property taxpayers could see their bills raised from \$11.97 to \$47.90 in the fall.

Cuts to education would be “disappointing for school districts across the state,” according to PENNCREST Superintendent Richard Borchilo. The governor’s proposal, he said, is “grounded in an objective, formula-driven system for distributing funds to school districts” which came from its own 2006 costing-out study aimed at fixing “Pennsylvania’s broken educational funding system.”

“A decrease in state funding at this late stage in the budgeting process will leave many districts with few choices except to increase local real estate taxes or cut programs,” he said. “Therefore, we hope the final state budget includes funding for education in an amount that is closer to the governor’s proposal.”

Only Conneaut School District appears to have its final proposed budget in order for its June 30 special meeting at 7 p.m. The school board plans to vote on a 2.7-mill increase for the 2008-09 academic year which would be a \$61.96 increase for the average homeowner.

With the June 30 deadline for school districts’ budgets only 10 days away and the status of the state’s budget unknown, the three Crawford County school districts’ hands are tied.

“Dropping that large of an amount, considering our constraints with Act 1, is going to have a dramatic effect on Conneaut School District,” said Superintendent Richard Rossi. “We were looking forward to the governor’s 6 percent increase, and also we were looking forward to having a fairer funding source for all schools across the state.”