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EDUCATION

Akron Public Schools facing multiple years of cuts, even with a levy, superintendent says

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Akron Public Schools could see multiple rounds of extensive cuts over at least the next three years, Superintendent Michael Robinson said Thursday.

Robinson said the administration is still "striving" to cut \$15 million out of the district's budget before next school year, as previously announced. But he said even if the district passes a levy, keeping the five-year forecast in the black is going to take multiple rounds of cuts.

He did not commit to a number for each year, but said it could be "quite substantial."

"I just don't want to decimate the system and put it in shock in the first year, knowing that I need to make sure our employees and teachers understand all that we're talking about," Robinson told the board, which held its regular business meeting Thursday night instead of Monday because of the solar eclipse.

Cutting \$15 million is roughly 4% of the district's budget.

Robinson said the district needs to "right-size," which will involve a combination of cuts and investments in key areas, like communications.

The board is weighing a levy ask on the November ballot, with the administration recommending a millage of 7.6, which would bring in just over \$25 million a year. That levy would be in addition to a 1.3-mill request that would only go toward building a new North High School.

Even if the levies pass, the district would still be spending at a deficit in the following years, slowly dipping into reserve funding. Robinson said that's why additional cuts would be needed.

"There will be cuts, I can tell you, this year, there will be cuts again next year, and we may possibly again be cutting in a third year, and maybe even in a fourth year," he said.

The school board voted last year to pledge to cut \$15 million out of the district's budget by the 2024-25 school year. That was then baked into the district's five-year forecast, which was submitted to the state and used in presentations of the district's finances to bond rating agency Standard & Poor's, which gave the district a solid rating as a result.

The administration has not presented a plan of how it will cut \$15 million out of the budget before the next fiscal year, which starts July 1. Reducing staff has not been ruled out. Robinson did say Thursday he had already made an unspecified amount of cuts to the summer school budget, paring back what the district was able to do the last few summers due to an influx of pandemic stimulus dollars that are now tapering off.

Students will also now have to pay \$50 a course for credit recovery courses. Robinson noted they were able to be free over the last few years because of the stimulus dollars, so there is a financial need to start charging students again. But he also wants to motivate them to do well in their classes and not have a need for credit recovery.

'How did we get here?' Akron Public Schools addresses financial troubles

The school board Thursday also had a conversation about building trust with the community ahead of a levy ask. Several board members brought forward concerns they had heard from the public. Those concerns ranged from general questions about why the district needs more money, to whether union contracts are to blame for the district's financial standing.

"People want to know, how did we get here?" board member Summer Hall said.

Vice President Carla Jackson said she hears concerns that the district is not being honest about finances.

"They believe that when we talk about the finances and why the number keeps changing, that it's not being told truthfully, as if we're trying to hide something," board Vice President Carla Jackson said.

Treasurer and CFO Steve Thompson gave a presentation to answer as many questions as possible.

The union contracts — which gave all employees, not just teachers, raises over all three years of the contracts -- are a piece of the puzzle, Thompson said, but just one piece. Employees of the district also should not be expected to work for years with flat wages, he said.

The single biggest factor in why the district needs more money, he said, is House Bill 920 — a 1970s law that says that whatever millage is worth when it is passed is frozen at that rate. That means even if property taxes go up, as they recently have in Akron, the school district does not get more money as a result.

Akron is currently operating its 2023-24 budget on the same local revenue dollars since 2012, the last time voters approved a levy. Costs for nearly everything have gone up since then, Thompson said.

Enrollment has also dropped, and may continue to as the birth rate continues to decline.

The district received almost \$150 million total over three rounds of federal stimulus dollars, known as ESSER funds, but those funds have to be spent by this September. Many staff that were hired using stimulus funds are now being paid for by general fund dollars.

The Ohio Fair School Funding Plan, an effort to make sure schools have both an adequate and equitable amount of money, also has not yet been fully funded, leaving districts in limbo about how much state funding they will receive in future years.

On paper, the board has a couple months to decide on a levy for November, but Thompson encouraged them not to wait long, as building a levy campaign takes time, including raising the money to fund a campaign.

Board member Bruce Alexander said it was important to pass a levy to preserve and prolong as much programming for students as possible.

"If you don't pass a levy, that stuff's going to hit, it's going to hit us hard," he said.

Board member Barbara Sykes said she wants Akron's children to continue to receive the kind of education her children received in APS, and she was ready to make a case to the community.

"I know this is a community that supports our schools," she said. "I know they have questions. I know we have responsibility to give them answers."

Board President Diana Autry said she thought the conversation about what the community was saying was "helpful for us all to hear, and hear it out loud."

"We need to be equipped with these answers moving forward," she said.

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