

Akron Beacon Journal

EDUCATION

Akron school board members demand more cuts from administration after levy passes

[Jennifer Pignolet](#) Akron Beacon Journal

Published 6:08 a.m. ET Nov. 20, 2024 | Updated 6:08 a.m. ET Nov. 20, 2024

The Akron Public Schools administration took heat from board members Tuesday night for a plan to cut just \$4.5 million out of the budget by the end of this school year.

The board's finance committee said more needed to be done to show voters who approved a levy this month that they were being fiscally responsible with the public's dollars.

"This does not seem to recognize that we heard them," committee co-chair Barbara Sykes said.

She told Superintendent Michael Robinson if he could not produce more cuts, the board would have to do it for him.

"If this is all you have to offer, then it would be up to (Rev. Gregory) Harrison, Dr. (Rene) Molenaur and other board members to come up with some reductions," Sykes said, naming other members of the board and finance committee. "That's where I see we are. If, Mr. Superintendent, if you can't come up with any more reductions, you and your administration cannot, then it would be up to us to do it."

Robinson said he would continue to look for ways to save money by the end of the year, including through attrition.

Voters this month approved a 7.6-mill operating levy to bring in about \$26 million a year, saving the administration and the board from having much harder, more urgent conversations. But board members and administrators also had pledged to cut more even if the levy passed, as the district still faces the need to pull money out of reserves to fill gaps between revenue and expenses.

Treasurer and CFO Steve Thompson presented the committee with a draft of the November five-year forecast, which the board has to approve before it is submitted to the state by the end of the month. The board is slated to vote on the forecast at its regular business meeting Monday.

Thompson presented three versions of the forecast, all now with the district's recently passed operating levy baked into the numbers.

The first version shows no further cuts this year or anticipated cuts next year, resulting in spending exceeding revenue by \$23 million this school year. The second took the \$4.5 million of cuts into account. But those cuts are mostly one-time expenses, so the savings is just to this year's budget, and does not save the district money long-term.

A third version had the \$4.5 million in cuts, plus an anticipated \$10 million in budget cuts for next school year.

The district doesn't have to declare now whether it will make those cuts next school year, and doesn't have to include them in the forecast. Cuts also don't have to be included into a five-year forecast until they are actually made, which wouldn't be for several months.

Thanks to the levy's passage, the five-year forecast has sufficient revenue and reserves far enough into the future to avoid the threat of financial oversight.

But Sykes said it was important to send a message to the community that the board was willing to do its part.

Thompson clarified that the board wanted the forecast to "concretely show those \$10 million" in cuts, which would be compounding, meaning they are expenses that are normally in the budget year after year, and so cutting them would save money every year and not just once.

Robinson said he expected to be able to cut more by the end of the year and above the \$10 million of recurring expenses for next year, even if it would not yet be reflected in the five-year forecast.

"I think we're going to be way above \$10 million for the life of this forecast," Robinson said. "But in preparation for tonight this is what we were able to do."

Harrison and Molenaur, the other co-chair of the committee, each said they also expected to see more cuts. Harrison and Sykes both explicitly stated they would not vote for the five-year forecast without more cuts.

The administration did not explain what would be cut in the \$4.5 million, stating only that it would be single-year costs like capital improvement projects that could be delayed.

Sykes said the board and the administration don't have to agree by the end of this month on what the cuts for next year will be, only that they are committing to doing them.

"I think it sends a more positive message to the community," she said. "Show at the front end... that we understand we have a responsibility to say OK, we're part of this."

Contact education reporter Jennifer Pignolet at jpignolet@thebeaconjournal.com, at 330-996-3216 or on Twitter @JenPignolet.