

School Board cuts taxes slightly

Reduction is minimal for coming year

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Posted - Wednesday, July 23, 2008 07:08 AM EDT

The Monroe County School Board on Tuesday set a tentative millage rate that reduces spending for the 2008-09 fiscal year by \$4 million. This follows a cap on spending recommended by the board in March.

The millage rate approved for now stands at 2.92, or \$2.92 per \$1,000 of assessed value. That's about 1.5 percent below this year's rate of 2.946. The board can reduce that rate after public hearings in August and September but not raise it.

Based on estimates of Monroe County's tax roll, that millage rate will generate between \$88 million and \$90 million in local tax dollars toward the School District's overall \$210 million budget. The final tax roll will be released in August and could affect that total budget figure.

At \$2.92 per thousand, the owner of a \$500,000 home with no homestead exemption would face \$1,460 in school taxes for the coming year. The owner of that same home paid \$1,473 this year.

Superintendent Randy Acevedo said rising property values the past few years led to decreases in the millage rate levied for school taxes. Despite that reduced millage, he said the district is making improvement in student performance: "We were a B district and moved into the A category," Acevedo said.

Board members Steve Pribramsky, Andy Griffiths and Duncan Mathewson voted in favor of the millage rate while John Dick voted no. Debra Walker was late for the meeting and missed the vote.

Employing a PowerPoint presentation, Dick talked about budgetary shortcomings, arguing that Monroe County spends more money per student (\$12,000) than any other county in Florida, yet student scores on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test and SAT are comparable with scores for students in counties that spend far less. Dick said classroom size is "the leading factor in improvement in all districts."

Impending job cuts could better target administrative and non-classroom positions, he said, instead of not renewing teacher contracts.

The PowerPoint presentation is available at www.monroe.k12.fl.us.

Tuesday's meeting in Key West was a workshop, so the final decision on taxes will come after a series of three public hearings, all scheduled to start at 6 p.m.: July 29 at the A.J. Henriquez Administration Complex in Key West, Aug. 26 in Marathon and Sept. 9 in Tavernier.

The district's fiscal year began July 1, so the budget approval process is done before the district will get total enrollment figures for the start of fall classes, along with the exact contribution per student that comes from the state.

Pribramsky, with support from Acevedo, said budgetary concerns could be better addressed following Labor Day. At that point, he said, the district will have a firm number of students enrolled. The 2008-09 budget should be reevaluated again in November or December, Pribramsky added, following the November election and meetings by state lawmakers in Tallahassee.

Florida's economic slowdown has prompted some legislators to predict another round of state budget cuts this fall, depending on how far state sales tax collections drop in the next quarter.