

Community

Local schools in financial trouble

By Janis Joseph
Emerald Reporter

It came as no surprise to the Eugene School District's budget committee that the district's 1990-91 budget is projected to be almost \$3.7 million in the hole.

The committee, which met Wednesday, is trying to produce the exact revenue and expenditure figures needed to balance the budget.

The predicted shortfall of \$3,674,349 spells potential danger for 130 people on the school district's work force, who could be laid off as a result of the money crunch, said Don Jackson, principal of South Eugene High School.

"Last year we cut three-and-a-half million dollars from the budget and raised the tax base, and we still had to cut about 170 people," Jackson said.

However, the predicted deficit may be too optimistic. The 1990-91 budget was prepared with the assumption that there would be no enrollment growth, no new capital improvements and no new classroom programs.

The district recently completed enrollment projections that show an increase of close to 300 students, according to a financial memo prepared by Gary Long, Director of Finance and Support Services.

"This increase clearly means additional staff (will be needed)," said Margaret Nichols, superintendent of Eugene's 4-] school district. The district tries to keep a 19-1 teacher-student ratio.

The district will also need to hire seven to eight additional special education teachers, Nichols added.

The committee also wants to restore funds for several significant issues that were scrapped in an effort to balance the bud-

et last year. These funds include textbook replacement, classroom furniture replacement, and grounds restoration, Long said.

"The district has an \$88 million budget," said David Piercy, assistant to the superintendent. "The state supplies about \$18 million, federal forest fees supply about \$3 million and the rest is generated through property taxes."

The district is unsure of the exact budget shortfall because of variables on the source of the revenue. The district was planning for only about \$1.5 million from forest fee revenues, but that figure has risen by about \$500,000 Piercy said.

However, unless another levy is passed by the voters, or other sources of revenue are found, the district faces a need to cut staff members. Last year, many of the cuts were cushioned by people taking leaves of absence, early retirements or study leaves. This year's cut-backs in the number of teachers will be more devastating, Jackson said.

The cost of running schools has about doubled from 1980 to 1990, Jackson said. "When the costs go up and income goes down, this equals problems."

"The cost for one student in the Eugene School District is about \$4,000 as compared with \$2,500 in many other districts," he added. "It's the quality of the program. Eugene is a lighthouse district. We are known across the U.S. as a success."

Another reason for the success of the schools is the high wages paid to the school's staff. Since 1986, the district's staff salaries have been well above the U.S. Consumer Price Index, according to a graph prepared by Long. The index is a measurement of changes in the retail prices of a constant market-

basket of goods and services.

Both Jackson and Piercy agreed that another method must be found to relieve the problem of school funding in Oregon. The state has not been successful in getting voters to make a change, Piercy said.

"The voters have always turned down sales tax," Jackson said. "But hopefully there will be a change and the voters will deal with the problem. We have a terribly antiquated way to pay for schools. A lot of older people can't pay the horrible property tax."

"We need to launch a community dialogue," budget committee member Paul Harrison said. "We need to pull together a number of people who are recognized as leaders in the community and ask them what to do. The state really isn't a player in relieving school budget shortfalls, and we need to bridge the gap."

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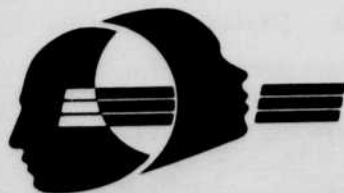
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