

Public has say on division budget

BY ALLISON DOWD

While it wasn't the knock-down, drag-out fight that Brandon school trustees might have expected at the same time last week, those in attendance at a public feedback session last night still had some tough questions about the board's 2010-11 budget.

Much of the public outcry surrounding the division's proposed \$69-million budget — which included a special levy increase of 9.1 per cent and an average residential tax increase of 6.5 per cent — has been tempered by the board's decision last Friday to take the province up on a revised Tax Incentive Grant (TIG) offer and freeze property taxes at last year's level.

The stand-pat taxation means that education taxes on residential properties across Brandon will remain the same as last year, provided they were reassessed at the city's average.



Darren Hardy, president of the Brandon Teachers Association, addresses Brandon school trustees during a 2010-11 school division budget feedback meeting Monday evening. (Tim Smith/Brandon Sun)

New properties, however, would see a 2.6 per cent education tax increase based on assessment growth.

But to cash in on the roughly \$1.84 million in incentive money the province is offering, trustees must

trim \$85,000 from the proposed budget.

Where that money may come from is a source of concern for Brandon Teachers' Association (BTA) president Darren Hardy.

"BTA respectfully asks that any reductions that are made aren't taken from resources that will impact the classroom," Hardy told trustees last night. "(Our) hope is that future students and future boards are not put in an extremely difficult position where the special levy has to be greatly increased to maintain programming if the TIG is removed."

Deb Arpin, president of the division's CUPE Local 737, urged trustees to not go back on any of their budget day decisions, specifically the ones to add \$50,000 for school secretarial support or a \$106,000 workplace health and safety officer.

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"We ask you, is there room to cut that \$85,000?" Arpin said. "We feel that you have a great senior administration team in place and they would not have asked for anything that was not needed to help the division run more efficiently."

The Brandon Chamber of Commerce, however, congratulated the board on making the tough choice to take the Tax Incentive Grant and cut the \$85,000, adding that the practice of budget reduction needs to be expanded in future years.

"Taking the tax incentive grant will be a welcome pause from what had become a rapidly increasing burden on the local ratepayer," chamber president Chris Griffin said. "Proper fiscal management and keeping yearly spending increases limited is so important to maintain long-term sustainability for our school division."

But taxpayer Grant Reynolds implored the board to go even further than that, suggesting that the division should only increase taxes at the rate of inflation.

"A lot of people in Brandon are seniors on a fixed income," he said. "We don't have the income that can justify spend, spend, spend."

"You have to realize that we do have a limit."

Board chair George Buri hinted to the Sun after last night's meeting that a tax freeze is likely as good as Brandon taxpayers are going to get this year.

"To cut even further, that would be like saying to the government, 'Here, take your money back.' We worked very hard to get to this funding ... we have to do what is best for us this year."

Trustees will consider the \$85,000 in budget cuts prior to giving final approval to the budget at their next regular board meeting on Monday.

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