

Tax hike stuns Chamber

Griffin suggests division hurting taxpayers

BY ALLISON DOWD

The Brandon Chamber of Commerce is imploring Brandon school board trustees to take a long, hard look at how their continued spending increases are crippling the city's taxpayers.

Trustees have tentatively approved a 9.1 per cent special levy increase on the division's 2010-11 budget, which translates into a 6.5 per cent education tax hike for existing property owners and a 2.6 per cent education tax increase for new properties.

Chamber president Chris Griffin says such a substantial increase is too much for most taxpayers in times of economic uncertainty, especially business owners.

"Businesses pay taxes and are affected three different times by the school division budget," Griffin told local media during a chamber-organized news conference yesterday morning. "They



Brandon Chamber of Commerce president Chris Griffin expresses his concerns over the Brandon School Division's property tax increase during a news conference held at the chamber office on Thursday. (Bruce Bumstead/Brandon Sun)

pay taxes on their businesses, on their private homes and continue to pay the full rate of (the province's) education support levy that's been slowly phased out (for) the homeowner.

"When there are tax increases in education, our members notice. This status quo of a six-to-seven-to-eight per cent increase over the past (few) years has got to stop."

With the uncertainty surrounding future provincial funding levels and the taxing

freedom currently afforded to local boards, the chamber believes Brandon trustees simply need to start making the tough budget choices that have for years been asked for.

But far more worrisome than the upward creep of education taxes, Griffin says, is the possibility that millions of dollars in extra funding requests tacked on to division budgets in recent years aren't helping the majority of students.

"We can appreciate that we want to have one of the best

divisions in the country, but are the programs timed right? Are we asking the taxpayer to pay for them at the wrong time?"

Specialized programs that cater to only a select number of students — such as the International Baccalaureate program at Neelin high school or the proposed single-track French immersion program at Harrison school — are two natural choices for such reductions, Griffin said.

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And since the costs associated with providing English as an Additional Language programming to the huge influx of immigrant students in the city have risen at a record rate, the chamber suggests the division should lobby harder to have the province cover all of those costs.

Division finance committee chair Brian Mayes told the Sun he's disappointed that a chamber employee who was present at a public consultation hosted by the board earlier this month opted not to voice the group's viewpoint at that time.

That's unfortunate, he said, considering a business

perspective could have added to their budget-day discussion.

"If they're going to sit at a public consultation meeting and listen to every speaker say how we should increase spending, maybe they need to review their processes," Mayes told the Sun. "Why aren't they standing up and having the courage to give their views before we set the budget?"

The board will hear public feedback to the proposed budget on Monday evening at the division office of Sixth Street. The chamber is already scheduled to speak at the meeting.

Presenters must pre-register by 3 p.m. that day by calling 729-3114.

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