

## **RCSD approves \$915M budget; reserve fund balance wanes**

### **Budget**

#### **Justin Murphy**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

For at least the fifth year in a row, the Rochester school board approved a budget Tuesday that draws more than \$10 million from the district savings account.

The \$915 million budget not only avoids layoffs but also adds scores of positions in special education, literacy and bilingual education, areas the district has identified as key for overall improvement.

Doing so, and plugging an initial projected \$65 million gap, required using \$20 million from savings. The district used the same amount last year and \$15 million the year before.

The same strategy will not be available any time in the near future.

Using \$20 million from an unrestricted fund balance for the 2018-19 budget leaves the district with about \$9 million in the bank, said Chief Financial Officer Everton Sewell. The budget foresees depositing nearly \$3 million back into that fund balance, which would leave about \$12 million

See **BUDGET, Page 4A**

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Continued from Page 3A

going forward.

That is within the board's guidelines for fund balance levels but will leave hardly any money available for 2019-20 and beyond.

The board also stripped the contingency fund from the budget, saying it would instead take money directly from the fund balance if an emergency arises.

"The unrestricted fund balance is the ultimate contingency fund," Board Vice President Willa Powell said. "By putting a contingency fund into the budget, you're introducing an undisciplined approach to budgeting."

Board President Van White said he would rather not have taken so much from the fund balance but thought providing services for students was a greater priority.

"What would be of more concern to me is not having the teachers we need in special education and bilingual classrooms," he said.

"I prefer not to (use so much fund balance), but if I have to, I'll choose to make the investment in our future."

The board praised Sewell for his work but chided him for not having answered some questions until just before the vote. The entire budget process was delayed by several months because staff was dedicated to the district-wide Path Forward work, among other matters.

Natalie Sheppard and Beatriz LeBron voted against the budget for that reason.

“I know there’s been a lot of work that’s gone on, but tonight I’m not prepared to vote yes on a budget when there’s all this information I haven’t been able to read through so I can stand behind my ‘yes’ vote,” Sheppard said.

The budget now goes to Rochester City Council for final approval.

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