

Victor schools hope voters OK 4% tax levy hike

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Squeezed by growing enrollment and a state funding formula that has not kept pace, the Victor Central School District is asking its residents to override the state property tax cap and approve a tax levy increase of 4 percent.

The proposed \$65.1 million budget would add eight teachers, a counselor, a nurse, two instructional coaches and a girls varsity golf coach. Those positions are necessary, according to the district, to keep pace with booming enrollment. The student body has grown by 14 percent in eight years, up 520 students to the current 4,347.

Though state aid has been increasing each year, the state no longer follows the formula that ties aid to student enrollment. That means growing districts like Victor may not receive proportionate increases in funding. The proposed 2016-17 budget is up 1.8 percent from 2015-16, but the tax levy — the portion of revenues raised directly from district residents' property taxes — would increase by 4 percent, more than the 1.8 percent allowable.

Though the tax cap is commonly referred to as 2 percent, it seldom actually matches that number. Each district goes through a series of calculations to determine its own cap. In 2014-15, for example, Victor raised its levy by 5.7 percent, three times this year's proposed increase, but was still below the cap.

For a district to exceed the tax cap, a super-majority of 60 percent of voters must approve the budget rather than the normal 51 percent. Residents in a district that exceeds the tax cap are ineligible to receive the state property tax rebate check; STAR exemptions are not affected.

If the district does not garner 60 percent support, it can submit another proposal, amended or not, for a second public vote. If that one also fails, it is forced to keep a flat tax levy.

Over the last five years, several districts have learned the hard way that despite flaws in the tax cap, voters don't like to exceed it. Of 107 attempted overrides, 36 have been rejected, according to New York State Association of School Business Officials.

One of them was West Irondequoit in 2014. Twice it proposed a cap-busting budget; twice it received support from more than 50 percent of voters but not quite 60 percent. Not only did the district have to enact an austere contingency budget for the following year, but school board President Charles Perreaud was ousted in the next year's election.

West Irondequoit Superintendent Jeff Crane used to work in Victor along with Victor Superintendent Dawn Santiago-Marullo. She said that despite his own experience, he encouraged her to attempt an override if necessary.

"What he said to me was to do what I have to do for the kids, and that's my mission," she said. "We generally have had very good support from the community, but this changes the rules, and nobody likes taxes. It doesn't matter whether you can afford them or not."

One thing working in Victor's favor could be the greater proportion of voters with children in the district. Children age 18 or younger make up 26 percent of the town of Victor's population compared with 20 percent in the town of Irondequoit, according to 2014 U.S. Census Bureau estimates. In 2010, 36 percent of Victor households had at least one child, compared with 26 percent in the town of Irondequoit.

“(Victor) has become a big town, but it still has a small-town heart,” Santiago- Marullo said. “We’re hoping people will support what we’re trying to do.”

More details about Victor's budget are on its website, victorschools.org. Polls will be open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. at the Victor Intermediate School, 953 High St.

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