

RCSD anticipates \$87 million in federal stimulus assistance

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The Rochester City School District stands to receive \$87 million in federal COVID-19 stimulus money, according to the state – but administrators cautioned against viewing it as a windfall.

The money is part of the federal stimulus bill that Congress passed in December. Full details have yet to be released, but Gov. Andrew Cuomo in his 2021-22 school aid runs provided figures for each school district in New York, based on the information the state already has received.

According to those aid runs, Rochester is in line to receive \$87.2 million, just \$1.6 million less than Buffalo and \$39 million more than Syracuse. Other Monroe County districts will receive between \$10.4 million (Greece) and \$800,000 (Wheatland-Chili).

The money will have some strings attached as far as the sorts of expenses it can cover and how long it can be reserved. But for a district accustomed to bad financial news it represents a welcome infusion.

“It could potentially mean we don’t have to do massive further reductions for this year,” finance committee chairwoman Beatriz LeBron said. “However, as we start talking about ’21-22, our expenditures are still there.”

Chief Financial Officer Carleen Pierce discussed the news and other budgetary matters Tuesday night in a preliminary discussion about the district’s 2021-22 budget proposal, to be presented Monday.

She shared some concerns about the funding news from Albany: in particular, a second consecutive year of flat foundation aid, as well as combining several areas of aid into one catch-all category in a way that could represent

an effective reduction. At the same time, enrollment continues to decline while staffing costs and student needs continue to rise. That means the board will need to grapple once again with difficult questions about closing schools and laying off staff.

“We need to be realistic about our staffing levels as well as our district footprint and they need to align with our enrollment needs,” Pierce said.

One possible use of the stimulus money is an ambitious overhaul of the district’s human resources and financial software. It has not been updated in more than a decade and is limping along with “Band-aids on top of Band-aids,” as Pierce put it.

The school board will be guided in this year’s budget process by the fiscal plan put together by State Monitor Shelley Jallow.

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