

23. Baldwin County Schools interim superintendent updates commission [MR, Baggett, 2/17/10]

BAY MINETTE -- A little hoarse from numerous speaking engagements and from the cold, Baldwin County's Interim Superintendent of Education JaNay Dawson spelled out losses the system in financial crisis faces regardless of passage of the proposed 3-year, 1-percent tax on March 23.

Dawson told Baldwin County commissioners at their meeting Tuesday that the system has faced revenue losses of \$61 million over the past 24 months, and cuts to personnel will continue.

"We are certainly not the only school system facing crisis," said Dawson. "More than 30 school systems in the state are also making public efforts to fund their systems."

School officials have called the current money crunch the most severe financial crisis in the system's history, and asked county commissioners to bring a sales and use tax increase to a public vote. Commissioners granted the request, and a vote is set for March 23 on the tax that is expected to generate about \$25 million annually.

Dawson said the money will go to local schools -- helping first save the jobs of 73 teachers, 42 assistant principals and 11 other staff members. She said 73 teachers cost roughly \$5 million annually while 24.5 assistant principal positions cost \$2 million and some 17.5 counselors cost \$1.1 million.

Eleven resource staff jobs, like librarians, cost \$1 million, and 142 other support staff like clerical workers and custodians cost \$5 million. She said those figures include some jobs already cut by the board that the tax revenue would cover, plus building back the one-month operations reserve fund.

"There is a place for all this money to go," Dawson said.

She said state cuts for the coming year will mean the system loses 126 teachers regardless of whether the tax passes. She said the tax revenue would not go to fund central office staff or to capital improvements, a criticism opponents raised due to the language included on the referendum ballot. County officials said the language is taken from Alabama law, and does not limit the use of the tax revenue.

Dawson said 56 systems in the state have less than a month's operating expenses in reserve, a state requirement. She said that unlike private businesses, schools don't have the option of cutting back production.

"Regardless of what our losses are," she said, "we never turn a child away." And enrollment continues to increase in the county, officials said.

Dawson said cuts in central office workers will continue, with all levels of staff under scrutiny. Currently, she said, the county's administrative costs were lower than the Alabama average, with Baldwin County's costs placing it fifth in the state for cost-efficient operations.

At the Baldwin County school board work session Monday night, staff members presented a list of properties owned by the board with combined values estimated in excess of \$4 million. The parcels are scattered across the county, and some have restrictions on their use or sale. Staff members said they were working to determine which ones the school board could sell to raise funds.

Dawson told board members that she and Chief Financial Officer Jean McCutchen would be submitting a preliminary financial plan to state education officials this week, making "brutal cuts" to extracurriculars, teacher positions and other programs under the assumption the proposed tax fails.

"There is no area, across the board, that will go untouched," Dawson said.

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