

### **32. Editorial: Managing the school budget [HT, Peck, 2/18/10]**

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. \_ Budget challenges for Huntsville city schools are about to get personal.

As many as 215 teachers and 66 other school employees could face layoffs next school year under a proposal to shave \$22 million from the system's \$190 million budget in fiscal 2011.

Officials hope to reach some of that target through retirements and other voluntary departures. City schools now employ nearly 1,800 teachers.

The job reductions are the result of a recession that created shortfalls in state and local tax revenues. With salaries and benefits consuming about 80 percent of the school system budget, personnel costs seem the only viable choice.

School leaders should have seen this budget bombshell coming. A sinking economy - made softer by a federal stimulus bailout and a drawdown of the state's rainy day fund - should have stirred major cost savings actions sooner.

The system had already endured one year of proration and was warned to brace for another when crafting this year's budget in August.

Instead, school officials spent down their reserves and made other general budget cuts without whacking major expenditures.

Schools Superintendent Dr. Ann Roy Moore presented the layoff plan to the school board this week. In addition to the teacher cuts, the proposal also calls for 10 fewer counselors, nine fewer assistant principals, five less nurses and various other cuts including \$1.5 million in bus transportation, and \$500,000 from overtime costs.

The cuts are subject to approval by the full school board. Unless some giant windfall magically makes its way into school coffers, the board has few other options.

Recent school consolidations were a good start toward getting finances under control. With six schools pared down to three this year, some savings are sure to be realized.

Two more consolidations were approved last month (East Clinton Elementary into Blossomwood, and Lincoln Elementary into Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary) beginning this fall. The closed schools (Stone Middle School and Terry Heights and West Huntsville elementary schools) remain empty and ready for any buyer.

Let's hope school leaders can quickly find a use for the abandoned school sites soon so they don't add blight to the neighborhood.

Huntsville is not alone in facing significant school layoffs. The Montgomery County schools system this week reviewed a plan to lay off as many as 400 employees. Birmingham City Schools is looking at cutting 200.

It's not a pretty picture. But it is what it is. May it be a lesson for school leaders to act sooner with spending cuts when the signs are there. Delaying the inevitable only makes the cuts sting worse.