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School District To Vote On \$155 Million Budget Reductions

Board Meets Tonight, February 1; Prepares For Potential Failure Of Proposed Statewide Special Election

■ By **TIFFANY RIDER**
Staff Writer

The Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) Board of Education may approve up to \$155 million in cuts over two years, the fourth phase of reductions proposed by the district in response to the state budget crisis. The proposal includes a worst-case scenario assumption that the proposed June special election by Gov. Jerry Brown fails.

K-12 schools across the state are counting on Brown's plan to put the option to extend increases for income, sales and vehicle taxes, previously set by former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, to a vote of the people. The extension of the current tax rate for five years would also help prevent the payment deferrals the state has been implementing to achieve significant Proposition 98 savings over the past several years.

Proposition 98, approved by voters in 1988, requires schools to report to the state where its dollars have been spent as well as have the state set aside funding when the economy is strong to assist schools in difficult fiscal times to prevent cutbacks or tax increases. While the state has relied on deferrals for one-time cost savings, districts have continued to operate large programs using borrowed money or reserves, which has become increasingly difficult and resulted in large budget reduction proposals, such as LBUSD's current plan.

One of Brown's major budget proposals for the 2011-12 fiscal year is to defer \$2.1 billion from K-12 education statewide, \$120 million of which is scheduled for LBUSD. His proposed tax rate extension may be put to a vote of the public in June.

Redevelopment agencies statewide are also on the chopping block as part of Brown's budget proposal to instead channel that money toward schools and other programs. The LBUSD Board has not taken a position on that particular element of the budget proposal. However, LBUSD does benefit from redevelopment and has had several partnerships with the city on joint use projects funded through the local agency.

Chris Eftychiou, spokesperson for LBUSD, said, "Certainly we want our children to grow up in a city that is able to remedy blight and some of the other problems of any urban setting. So there are no easy answers here, no easy choices, and we'll have to leave that decision on redevelopment up to the decision-makers."

The school district receives more than 80 percent of its revenue from the state, and about 40 percent of the state budget is dedicated to public education. According to Eftychiou, the district is inextricably linked to the state budget and all of its prob-

lems, and as the state budget goes, so go the budgets of K-12 school systems statewide.

At the next board meeting on February 1 (tonight), held at LBUSD headquarters, 1515 Hughes Way in Long Beach at 5 p.m., the board will review a two-year budget reduction plan that may result in larger class sizes, selected school closures, more than 400 teacher layoffs and further layoffs of staff, administrators and others from the district's support services. Significant impacts may hit instructional programs, music, athletics, school safety, transportation and more. These reductions are on the agenda as a discussion and potential action item. If implemented, these reductions would be on top of the \$170 million in cuts the district has already made over the past three years.

Jon Meyer, 4th District boardmember and former principal of Wilson High School, said the class size reductions and proposed teacher layoffs would be devastating. "The strength of our district is in our great teaching staff and our wonderful, strong curriculum," he said. "By further decimating our teaching staff, I just fear that the quality of our district is going to suffer immensely."

Meyer estimated the number of notices may exceed 600, but a conservative estimate of the actual number of layoffs is in the 400 range.

"We're in such a bind that by law we must notify folks by March 15, yet we won't know what the governor's budget has in store for us until summertime," he said. "There's no wiggle room there, so unfortunately we're probably going to have to notify more teachers than, hopefully, will have to be terminated." Many teachers would be affected in a reassignment process because the district can "bump" teachers with less seniority, according to Eftychiou. "The best thing we can do is . . . plan for the worst," Eftychiou said. "We really have no other choice, because we don't want to be caught holding the bag if the worst-case scenario does arrive and we haven't planned for those particular cuts."

Michael Day, president of the Teachers Association of Long Beach (TALB), said the devastating cuts proposed by LBUSD are a direct result of cuts from Sacramento that can only be avoided by supporting a June election. "I hope that we can come together as a community to support a June initiative. . . . I'm a lifetime Long Beach resident and I have a daughter in our Long Beach schools. For me, personally it hits on a lot of different levels. I want to see what's best for our kids, and I think a June initiative will do that."

The most dramatic impact on student achievement would be

class size increases, according to Meyer, but the proposed cuts aren't the end of the school district's budget reduction efforts, Meyer said. "There will be additional items that will really raise some eyebrows, I'm sure, at our next meeting that will be added to that for consideration. It's not getting any better."

Potential School Closures And Principal Sharing

As of December 2010 enrollment numbers, LBUSD has 11 elementary schools with fewer than 500 students. According to the budget proposal, those schools could be forced to share principals – a cut Meyer said is a terrible idea that must also be put on the table for consideration. "It's just not the way to go, but if we must we must," he said.

Also on the chopping block are two small elementary schools – Buffum and Burroughs – which could close down at the end of this school year. The "Why now?" is due to budget constraints, Meyer said. "We'll have an ongoing savings by closing those two schools of about \$1.7 million a year, and if we're looking at [millions of] cuts within the next year or two, it seems like a small chunk, but we've got to make it all add up," he said.

LBUSD has proposed boundary changes that assess to which school's the students from Buffum and Burroughs could be sent. According to Eftychiou, the small number of students at these schools have reduced the schools' operational efficiency.

"These proposed school closures are a continuation of a series of cuts that we've been implementing for several years," he said. Along with budget reductions, enrollment numbers have been on the decline. Eftychiou said the district has lost about 14,000 students in the past decade – the equivalent of three LBUSD high schools.

The school closures proposal was originally presented to the board at a January 18 meeting, when parents and children from

the schools spoke out in opposition to the plan. Letters were sent to parents of children from both schools prior to the meeting, and the boundary changes proposal was released days later. Bixby Elementary and Alvarado Elementary boundaries could be extended to take over the area designated for Buffum, and Burroughs students could be sent to Birney, Signal Hill or Longfellow schools per boundary adjustments. Buffum and Burroughs each have fewer than 300 students.

Constance Rapadas, PTA president of Burroughs Elementary School, is a former Burroughs student who sees the potential school closure as a conflict for children who would have to travel further to school as well as the ability of their parents to attend school functions. She also said parents are not happy about the location of the schools their children would be transferred to, noting that one parent recognized Signal Hill Elementary is near Pacific Coast Highway – which the parent referred to as a high crime area. Although Birney Elementary is nearby, Rapadas said the majority of parents currently walk their children to school and would have to resort to driving with the change, creating more traffic.

The last school the district closed was DeMille Middle School at the end of last year. It is being demolished and is being replaced with a small high school. The district also closed Tucker Elementary at the end of the 2007-08 school year to merge with MacArthur Elementary in Lakewood, approximately four miles away, allowing the district to use the facilities at Tucker for school programs formerly housed in leased facilities. The move saved the district about \$1 million that year, adding 400 students from Tucker to MacArthur's 430 students.

The school district is considering its options for the use of the properties if closed, and according to Eftychiou, it is possible that other school district operations could be moved to that site. ■