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# Senator discusses school funding

Tuesday, September 8, 2009

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State Sen. Stewart Greenleaf, R-12, spoke with the Upper Dublin School Board in a public meeting Aug. 31 to discuss the current state budget impasse and state funding for education.

Greenleaf met with the board, other district administrators and residents for a question-and-answer session in the cafeteria of Upper Dublin High School.

One of the main topics discussed at the meeting was how the two currently proposed budgets would impact residents of Upper Dublin Township and the other municipalities Greenleaf represents.

"We're in a recession, and we're looking at a \$3 billion hole," Greenleaf said of the current state debt. "What do we do when we have a \$3 billion hole? That's what we have to address. Either you raise taxes or you deal with the funds you have, and that's what we're trying to do."

Greenleaf spoke on how Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed budget and the Republicans' proposed budget, Senate Bill 850, would each impact Upper Dublin.

Under S.B. 850, Upper Dublin School District would receive a 21.2 percent increase in funding, according to Greenleaf.

Greenleaf said under the governor's budget, while the district would receive \$262,000 — a slightly higher percentage increase — the township's residents would have to pay a total of \$6.5 million in increased personal income taxes.

"[Rendell's] proposal is to raise the personal income tax by 16 percent," Greenleaf said. "Our residents will just pay astronomical state income taxes. I can't vote for that. I can't vote for an income tax that would pose such a burden on my constituents."

Board member Margie Barrett asked Greenleaf to use his experience in the state Legislature to help finalize a budget.

"What I'm expecting from you is strong leadership," she said, urging him to work with Rendell. "There has to be some compromise."

Since neither proposed budget has been passed, school districts currently are receiving no state funding.

"The impact of not having a state budget doesn't have much of an impact on us because of our limited state aid," board President Michael Paston said.

The limited state funding the district receives was also a topic of much conversation.

Under the current formula for distributing state aid to districts, Upper Dublin receives funding that covers 15 percent of its budget, according to Greenleaf.

"You're paying 85 percent of your budget," he said. "In spite of that, you have picked up the difference to create a great school system here in Upper Dublin. The issue is that if we want more school funding, the battle is to change the formula. We can certainly do better than 15

percent."

Greenleaf said he felt the current distribution of funds was especially unfair considering Montgomery County pays more personal income tax than any other Southeastern county.

"It's a battle in Pennsylvania to get more money to these school districts," Greenleaf said. "I'm slowly getting more people to support our districts."

Paston also expressed concerns about the loss of federal stimulus money that is being used statewide to aid education.

"Our number one concern is, what happens in two years when that funding runs out?" Paston said. In two years, there will be a statewide "almost \$7.5 million hole from that stimulus money," he said.

"In two years, things can change," Greenleaf said. "We're relying on that hopefully the economy's going to come around. We can always rely on other measures if that doesn't happen."

Board Vice President Joseph Chmielewski raised concerns about the rising costs of education.

"It's a given education expenses go up every year," he said. "How do we deal with that? This is a no-win situation. We want to maintain excellence, but the dollars aren't allowing it and the politics aren't allowing it."

"I think it's important for all of us to be as fiscally responsible as we can," Greenleaf said.

Chmielewski also raised the point that the costs of faculty salaries and benefits, the majority of district costs, are increasing at a faster rate than the money coming into the district.

"The state has no control over that; you have control over that," Greenleaf said of salaries and benefits.

Greenleaf concluded the meeting by thanking those present for expressing their concerns.

"I'll take that back to Harrisburg and do what I can to help this situation," he said. "I think it's important to take the steps to help you as much as we can."

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