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Stafford school board approves \$100,000 in budget cuts

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By Marcus Hatfield
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STAFFORD — The Board of Education on Monday approved \$100,000 in budget cuts, laying off a part-time custodian and cutting some sports programs.

The board also voted to ratify a union contract covering about 150 employees.

The Board of Finance last week ordered the school board to make the cuts after voters rejected the 2010-11 budget proposal at a May 19 referendum.

The school board approved cuts recommended by School Superintendent Therese Fishman. In addition to laying off a part-time custodian at Stafford High School, the school board also cut funding from the athletics department, summer school for younger students, the credit re-entry program for struggling students, and technology and textbook spending. She said the cuts to programs mean that fewer students will have access to them.

"I am very worried about how we're going to continue on even with this level of cuts," said Fishman, who provided recommendations for additional rounds of cuts in case the budget fails at the next referendum, which will likely be held on June 9.

Some of the cuts were offset by savings realized by accepting a lower level of insurance coverage for the school system's bus contract and the return of a special education student from a magnet school, Fishman said.

School Board Chairman Mark Fontanella said the bus insurance coverage would merely be rolled back to the current level of coverage instead of increasing it as had been planned.

A total of \$10,000 was cut from athletic programs. Athletic Director Damian Frassinelli identified four programs that could be cut, including the freshman basketball team, a junior varsity soccer team, a season of cheerleading, and an assistant wrestling coach position.

Frassinelli said he will determine which age groups can still participate in town recreation programs if school athletics are cut.

"No matter what the end result is, some sports or activities at the high school and middle school will be affected," Frasinelli said.

Fontanella said the board tried to make cuts across the board so no one area would take a disproportionate amount of the cuts.

"I'm certainly impressed with the superintendent's due diligence and recommendations," Fontanella said. "I thought we would have seen more whole positions tonight, and due to her and her staff, that wasn't the case."

The board also voted to ratify a three-year labor contract with non-certified employees, a group including about 150 paraprofessionals, secretaries, bookkeepers, custodians, and cafeteria workers.

The contract, which is retroactive to July 1, 2009, gives workers a 2 percent pay raise in the

current fiscal year and 2½ percent raises in each of the next two years.

The agreement was ratified by the employees on May 10 after several months of contentious negotiations that led the employees' union to file a complaint with the state Board of Labor Relations.

Carol Parker, an in-school suspension paraprofessional and a co-president of the Stafford chapter of the Service Employees International Union Local 2001, said the contract was not exactly what the workers wanted, but said it's a "good starting place."

"I'm glad it's over," Parker said. "It's been a long several months."

Fontanella thanked the union for reaching out to the school board and said Fishman did a "fantastic job" in pulling the two groups together.

"I think both sides eventually got what they were looking for, we just went through a different route," Fontanella said.

The agreement was held up for months when the two sides could not agree on a provision of the contract concerning seniority and layoffs among paraprofessionals.

Financial Analyst Meg Devlin said the increase for the first year of the contract totals \$79,156. The increase for the second year is \$48,421, she said. Figures weren't available for the third year.

Union spokesman Matt O'Connor said he was concerned about the custodial position being cut from the high school. Now that the contract has been ratified by both sides, O'Connor said the union would work to identify ways to help the school board save money to prevent deeper cuts.

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