

# Public gets crack at budget

BY LIZ STANLEY  
STAFF WRITER

County schools leaders have a laundry list of budgetary needs for next fiscal year, although most of those priorities would only work to maintain the status quo.

Community members had their chance to influence the ongoing assessment of those needs Monday night.

At a public hearing, about 20 people came before the Board of Education to voice their support for and concerns about the requests.

After many drafts, the figures now total about \$3.2 million, a figure Superintendent Shirley Carraway described as a "big" amount.

Of that amount, \$2 million is needed just to continue existing programs.

After reviewing the budget situation, Carraway opened the microphone to the public for feedback.

Many, including board Chairwoman Libbie Hough, praised the board's efforts, particularly the push to improve band programs at both district high schools.

If approved, both Orange and Cedar Ridge high schools will

receive \$25,000 for their band programs.

"Extracurriculars are a hook that keep students in schools," Carraway said.

Anne Stewart, a parent of an Orange High student, said 85 percent of the school's instruments are 20 years old. "It is cheaper to buy new ones than keep on repairing the ones we have," she said.

Concerns were also raised about how the district might ease the difficulties students face when entering middle and high school.

Data show that students' proficiency in both reading and math drops noticeably when they enter middle school.

Carraway said she thinks a lack of support in students' formative years causes the decline.

"It is disconcerting when students regress at the middle grades," she said.

Budget requests for two new subject-area specialists might help alleviate inconsistency in curricula.

Orange High teacher Vanessa Sabbagh said the district also needs funding for additional staff, especially to aid students in Advanced

Placement courses.

After the hearing, the board continued budget discussions at its regular meeting.

Board members raised concern with teacher retention — a problem they hope to solve by increasing supplements for longtime educators.

"It is imperative to keep these teachers," board member Liz Brown said. "It would be heartbreaking to lose them."

She suggested that every teacher with four or more years in the district receive a 1 percent pay increase.

But Carraway said the concern for supplements is unnecessary.

"Teachers leave for all kinds of reasons, but I have never heard of one leaving because of a supplement," she said.

Carraway said staff will estimate the costs of supplement increases before the board's Monday meeting, when final budget requests will be approved to send over to the county.

Contact the City Desk at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

# School budget talks still focus on equity

BY BRIANNA BISHOP  
STAFF WRITER

In a county with two distinct school districts, budget discussions are never easily handled.

And as those countywide discussions near completion this year, school leaders are supplying their constituents with the best information they can to ensure that their concerns get equal air time.

In the midst of what is being called a difficult budget year, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools officials held a meeting Monday to let people know what's in store for the budget at the state and county levels.

City schools spokeswoman Kim Hoke presented information about contacting members of the Orange County Board of Commissioners and representatives in the General Assembly to the more than 30 attendees gathered in the media center of East Chapel Hill High School. The group, comprising mostly

members of school organizations, also discussed ways to circulate budget information to parents.

"Informally, I think a lot of ideas have been shared to get information out," Hoke said after the meeting.

Creating a listserv for members of school groups and sending out an informational message through Connect-ED, the district's telephone system, were some of the ideas brainstormed at the meeting.

Due to a request for a more than \$200 increase in per-pupil funding and possible state funding reductions, the district has to draft possible spending reductions, which have piqued the interest of many parents and school staff.

Potential areas of impact include middle school after-school programs and teacher assistants.

Even while suggesting spending cuts, city schools' requests still will have to compete for approval at the county level, where the needs of the Orange County school district will be equally valued.

County budget preparations are being further complicated by the now glaring funding disparities between both districts.

Equity has been a buzz word surrounding school funding talks since Commissioner Moses Carey Jr. raised the idea of merging both districts in 2003.

Inequalities primarily stem from city schools' special tax, which gen-

erates about \$13 million each year.

Commissioners have estimated that they need about \$2.3 million to tackle the disparity.

One proposal for streamlining school funding is three-tiered.

The highest priority would devote funding to mandates such as teacher pay and benefit increases.

One notch down would be the allocation of funds to remedy the impact of state budget cuts.

District officials estimate that \$575,000 in discretionary budget cuts and a potential 4 percent reduction in the state's education budget, if allocated evenly across all districts, could result in a loss of about \$2 million for schools.

The third tier would address equity.

"What (commissioners have) talked about more is agreeing on some things they will fund directly," city schools Superintendent Neil Pedersen said.

Pedersen told the group Monday that commissioners also could decide to raise the countywide tax and lower city schools' special tax as a way to mitigate disparities.

Commissioners and members of both school boards will meet jointly at 7 p.m. tonight at the Southern Human Services Center in Chapel Hill to discuss district funding.

Contact the City Editor at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

# Low-income portion of development gets OK

BY TED STRONG  
ASSISTANT CITY EDITOR

Not everyone was thrilled with the details, but the low-income component of a set of proposed developments made its way through the Chapel Hill Town Council on Monday night.

Crosland Inc. a developer, needed the Town Council to approve a change to its special-use permit in order to expand Dobbins Hill, an affordable housing development. The council voted 8-1 in its favor, with council member Dorothy Verkerk as the dissenting vote.

The expansion is an outgrowth of a the Wilson Assemblage, a development Crosland proposed next door.

When the council criticized the Wilson Assemblage's lack of affordable housing in November, Crosland proposed the 32-unit addition to Dobbins Hill.

The developer planned to make the expansion affordable through state tax credits. But the tax-credit program has a very tight deadline, which led the council to fast-track

the issue in January.

"This is very time sensitive," said Roger Waldon, the town planning department's director.

Dean Edwards, Crosland's vice-president for affordable housing, said the town accommodated the developer's timing constraints nicely.

"They've done a great job in getting us ... on a fast track in getting this done," he said.

Orange Community Land Trust Executive Director Robert Dowling said that one of the deal's biggest pluses for affordable housing in the area is that his organization will be given the option to buy the properties at a vastly reduced price when the tax-credit program expires.

A separate IRS program permits the trust to purchase the buildings for their remaining debt, something Dowling expects to be a bargain.

"\$3.2 million to build them today, and yet we'll be able to buy them for \$700,000 15 years from now," he said.

But the deal also had its downsides. While the council passed rules protecting neighborhoods

from crowding development and slowed residential traffic earlier in the night, the Dobbins Hill proposal would have the opposite effect by crowding buildings together and opening cul-de-sacs to traffic, Verkerk said.

"There's a real stark contrast there," she said.

"This one really makes me angry because it wasn't thoughtful," she added.

While council member Ed Harrison did vote in favor of the proposal, he noted some drawbacks to the plan.

"A lot of places in North Carolina would have had to have had a rezoning," Harrison said about the entirety of the Wilson Assemblage and Dobbins Hill.

"In sum, we have maxed out this corner, and whoever comes next is in for a tough time," he added.

Dowling admitted that the solution wasn't perfect but said the density mirrors a growing local trend. In the end, he and Edwards emphasized the benefits they say the affordable housing will bring.

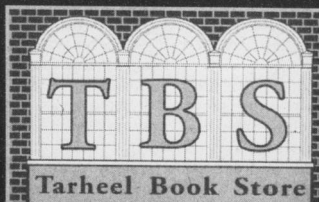
"32 units," Edwards said. "You know, in the scheme of things I guess it's not a large number of units, but 32 families will be able to come in and find an affordable rental unit."

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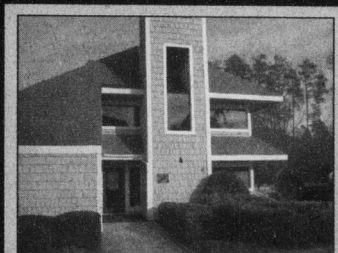
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