

## Parents, staff angry at Buena school board considering privatizing aides

CLAIRE LOWE Staff Writer

BUENA VISTA TOWNSHIP — In an emotional meeting Tuesday night, district paraprofessionals and parents chastised the Buena Regional Board of Education over its consideration to outsource the aides to balance the budget.

“You stood up and said you didn’t want to privatize, but in essence it’s already done,” said parent Amy Maurelli of Buena Boro.

During a meeting attended by over 100 parents, paraprofessionals, residents and teachers, the Board of Education heard from Interim Superintendent Mary Lou DeFrancisco presented a possible \$865,000 in savings to the school district if it were to outsource the school’s 51 aides.

“Our goal is not to privatize. Our goal is to provide the best educational programs possible to our children,” DeFrancisco said.

This is the second year in a row that the outsourcing of aides has been brought forward as a way to save money. Last year the proposal was ultimately rejected by the board after a similarly passionate meeting.

According to business administrator Pasquale Yacovelli, no decision has been made yet. Proposals for outsourcing were solicited in January, but Yacovelli said they were for informational purposes and he has rejected those proposals.

DeFrancisco, noting that Buena’s state aid this year is flat over last year, said that the district cannot cut the aide positions to part-time per the union contract. She said if it could, the district would save the most money, \$1 million because of the loss of health benefits to those employees.

School library assistant Amy Collins said that all the other employees in the district are eligible for health benefits and questioned why the paraprofessionals were not.

“But those of us who are in the trenches every single day with the teachers and the kids, we’re not worthy?” Collins said, eliciting applause from the audience.

District auditor Mike Garcia of Ford Scott Associates was present to speak to the district’s \$4.8 million surplus in its June 30, 2017 audit, which had many in the audience questioning how the district could not afford the paraprofessionals.

According to Garcia, \$2 million of that surplus was already earmarked for the 17-18 budget. Another \$1.3 million is set aside for the 18-19 budget.

Garcia said that leaves an additional \$1.5 million in it as a funding source, \$482,143 of which is reserved for capital expenditures and \$314,161 reserved for prior year encumbrances.

The remaining \$738,584 is unreserved, but still under the amount needed to fund the full-time paraprofessionals. Garcia said that the \$37 million general budget, as introduced Tuesday night, already includes the \$865,000 in savings from privatization.

“So the money is there, but it’s just what you’re choosing to spend it on,” said parent Sabrina Fatty of the Milmay section of Buena.

Several representatives from the NJEA were also present to support the aides. Greg Yordy, NJEA associate director of negotiations assistance, said that the cost of the aides’ salary and benefits actually decreased by \$95,000 from last year to this year and questioned why the money couldn’t be found elsewhere to keep the aides.

Gretta Bohren, Buena Regional Support Staff Association president, said that the union met with the board prior to Tuesday’s meeting to try and negotiate “in good faith.”

“We brought proposals out that we thought saved significant amounts of money,” Bohren said. “We don’t think that the board wants to work with us.”

Some members of the board, including Michael Feaster and Debra Bell, said they were against the privatization.

After the meeting, Yacovelli said if the paraprofessionals are not outsourced, the money has to come from somewhere else. He said that last year 24 positions were eliminated in order to balance the 17-18 budget.

In other business, the school board approved hiring a new superintendent, David C. Cappuccio, at an annual salary of \$149,000. Cappuccio is currently the Director of Special Services and Policy at the Black Horse Pike Regional School District. Board members James Abba and Bell voted ‘no.’

The board also approved a special meeting for its budget public hearing and final adoption on May 1.