

LOCALNEWS

Contract negotiations continue

Superintendent says talks are 'going smoothly'

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

After a three-month lull, International Falls School Board members and representatives of the teachers union Local 331 are back at the contract negotiation table.

The groups met Tuesday night for the first time since the middle of July. District Superintendent Nurdy Nelson said the break was to allow the school year to get underway and determine student enrollment figures following the layoffs of 265 Boise Inc. employees in October.

"We thought it would be best to get into the school year a little bit," Nelson said of the three-month break in negotiating a labor contract. "With the Boise announcement in May, we didn't know where we'd be sitting as far as student numbers go."

The district's about 70 teachers are working under a 2011-2013 contract that expired June 30. Nelson said the groups are back at the table to determine the number of class periods during a school day and clarify some of the expired contract language.

"The seven-period day is still on the table, but there hasn't been any progress on that," the superintendent said.

Falls High School students now have a six-period day and Nelson said an added period would allow for more electives.

"The district here really needs to remain and increase its competitiveness with all the other options that are out there for kids," Nelson said. "The district needs to offer more classes that students may be interested in."

He said some 11th-grade students are satisfying their graduation requirements early with a lack of electives to choose from their senior year. Having one more period is something the board is pushing for; the teachers, Nelson said, want to see what is available to them before they agree to anything.

John Sandberg, teachers Local 331 president and FHS social studies teacher, said many discussions during summer negotiation meetings centered around the seven-period day and how it would impact both students and teachers.

"There is a concern that there would be reductions in staff," he said. "We're not opposed to a seven-period day, but we need to have some reassurances (before we agree to it)."

Sandberg said students are top priority, and with an added period, the workload of teachers would be increased when it is already "tough to create lesson plans for five different class periods."

He said the real hurdle to overcome before agreeing to anything about class periods is for the board to address concerns the teachers have and make adjustments to pay that would go with it.

"Since we met last, we've talked to several schools that have made the same kind of switch," he said. "We heard their concerns and what

districts have done to ease those concerns...We will be bringing some of that information next time we meet."

In addition to the number of class periods, Tuesday's negotiation discussions also included "smoothing out" some of the expired contract language, Nelson said, adding it is common for language to expire over time.

"When language is written, the person writing it knows what they are thinking about," he said. "As time goes on, new people coming in may not understand what was really meant."

Nelson said the bulk of the items in need of clarification are requests made by teachers for personal, sick and funeral leave.

"We really didn't agree on or present any new language or major changes," he said.

Sandberg also said some items in the contract needed to be changed because of legislation, but it wasn't "anything huge."

Minnesota lawmakers this year made it mandatory that principals undergo a formal observation, and beginning next year teachers will be required to do the same.

"Under new legislation, the teachers need to be evaluated on a regular basis next year," Nelson said. "But the difficulty with that is that with the workload of principals, time doesn't always allow for timely observations"

The superintendent said the two sides have made verbal agreements to get ahead of the new requirements. He said observations for non-tenured teachers will be performed in the middle of November, February and April.

With no levy increase proposed, county sets Dec. 3 hearing

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

A larger tax base and additional tax relief provided by the 2013 Legislature has allowed Koochiching County officials to propose no increase in the amount collected by the 2014 levy from property owners above what was collected in the levy this year.

County officials propose to collect a \$3.9 million levy in 2014 to support a little more than a \$25 million budget, said county Administrative Director Teresa Briggs.

A hearing required by the state on the proposed budget and levy is scheduled for 6:15 p.m. Dec. 3 at the courthouse. Taxing entities proposed their 2014 levies in September to allow the calculation of tax statements for individual property owners. Those tax statements are expected to arrive in the mail to property owners in mid-November.

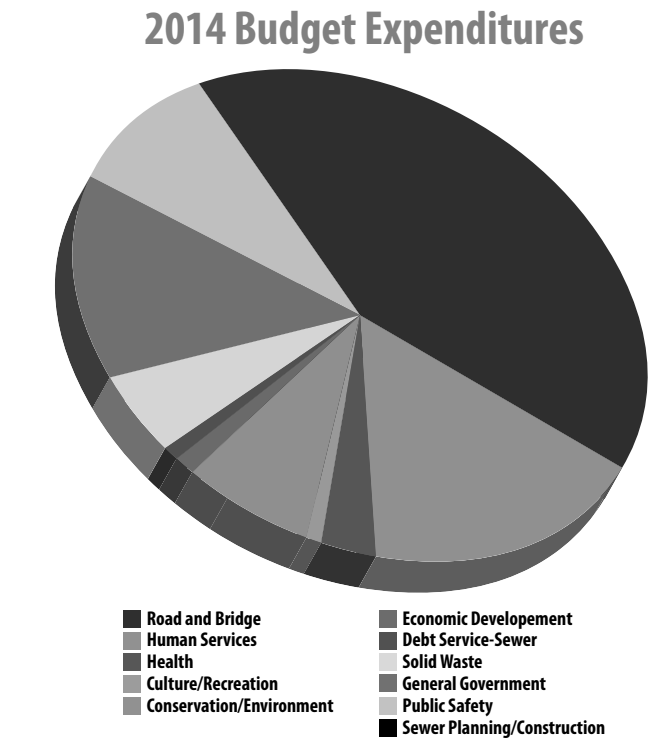
Following the Dec. 3 hearing, the county board may reduce, but not increase the final levy, which must certified to the county auditor that month.

The purpose of the hearing is to allow residents to comment on the proposed budget and levy for the coming year. It is not the time to question valuation of individual properties. That issue is heard by the county Board of Equalization in June, after property owners receive in May yellow, mailed notices from the Koochiching County assessor about valuation and classifications of their property.

Briggs said the tax statements sent to property owners in November include line items showing the amount each taxing authority has proposed to collect. The bottom line shows the total tax change proposed for the coming year compared to the current year.

She urged taxpayers to consider which taxing authority may be responsible for any changes in their taxes compared to the previous year and attend that authority's hearing if they would like to comment on the proposed budget and levy.

Briggs explained the tax relief for Koochiching County residents came in the form of an increase in the payment in lieu of taxes, known as PILT, on state lands within the county and a restoration of some of



the county program aid it receives from the state.

Briggs said the state more than doubled the amount of PILT paid per acre to \$1.50 per acre.

"It looks like a substantial amount of money (that will come in PILT) and taxpayers are due that when you look at the millions of acres in state lands in the county that we were getting 64 cents per acre on compared to the value that would come to taxpayers if it were (privately owned and developed and) on the tax roles," she said.

She said the county's budget has been supported with reserve funds because of cuts in previous years to funding the state provides to counties with no relief by the state in mandates for expenditures.

"When we apply the extra PILT and program aid, the budget soaked it up like a sponge as revenue missing from the budget for quite a few years," she said.

She said commissioners believed the extra PILT and program aid would allow for no increase in the levy, but was not enough to decrease the levy.

"With the additional revenue, we're just barely breaking even," she said.

In addition, county taxpayers could see a reduction in tax because of a larger tax capacity in 2014 compared to this year.

The tax base of a taxing authority is the sum of the values of all taxable property in the authority. Tax capacity is the taxable market value of each parcel multiplied by the appropriate classification rate as established by the Minnesota Legislature. Classification rates are based on the use of the property

Briggs said if an individual property tax classification and value didn't change, property owners could see about a 1.5 percent decrease in property taxes.

"It's good news and the basis for not doing an increase in the levy," she said of the increased money from the state and increase in tax base.

Briggs said the 2014 proposed budget is about \$5 million more than it has been in other years because of a number of large highway projects that were planned for 2013, but deferred to 2014.

She said a number of other things — one-time expenditures — have added to the increase in budget, including a higher-than-normal amount of contingency for pending projects, and \$138,000 as the county's half of a match with International Falls for a federal Economic Development Administration grant the community is seeking to help address the needs left by elimination of 265 jobs at the local paper mill.

In addition, she said money is budgeted to replace the roof on the Koochiching County Law Enforcement Center and \$41,000 is marked for the county's share of upgrades to the Arrowhead Regional Corrections facility near Duluth.

"We are still using reserves, but not to the extent we were the year before," she said.

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