

SOUTH BRUNSWICK: School board hopefuls discuss budget plans

By Davy James, Staff Writer

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Candidates for the Board of Education said the school budget is the most important issue facing South Brunswick in the future.

Six candidates are vying for three, three-year seats on the board on April 20: incumbents Harry Delgado, of Dayton; Deborah Taylor, of Kendall Park; and Anna Tupe, of Monmouth Junction; and challengers Daniel Boyle, of Dayton; Patrick Del Piano, of Monmouth Junction; and Deven Patel, of Dayton.

Last week, the Board of Education unveiled a proposed \$131.7 million budget that carries a tax rate of \$2.680 and includes the elimination of 112 positions.

Mr. Patel, 39, is a civil engineer for the state Department of Transportation. He said he would have preferred a budget with more administrative cuts.

"This wasn't a good budget for teachers and I would've cut more on the administration side, but other than that I think it was balanced and they did a good job," Mr. Patel said. "But there should be no more cutting of teachers and paraprofessionals."

Mr. Patel said that, to deal with potential future cuts in state aid, the district should look at cutting costs through energy conservation, eliminating one of the two late bus runs for students by arranging car pools, and eliminating some of the administrative staff at the high school level.

He said he supports the district's decision to charge a fee to participate in certain sports and clubs, but would like to make sure the fees do not restrict less-fortunate students from playing.

"I completely support the teachers and staff of this district," Mr. Patel said. "We need to get the message out to the public to go out and vote in support of this budget so we don't do any further damage to a school system that is one of the best in Middlesex County."

Capt. Delgado, 54, is a South Brunswick police officer and has served on the Board of Education for 15 years, including three years as president and three years as vice president. He is president of the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Capt. Delgado said no other year has been as difficult as this. The economic downturn has had a devastating impact on the school system.

"I feel terrible about the budget," Capt. Delgado said. "This community has committed years of resources and support to build the programs that we have. To begin reducing them is painful and disappointing. Now having said that, I believe that we have made the best of a bad situation. While we have respectfully registered our disappointment and concern with our elected officials, simultaneously, we have taken a very fair and equitable approach to making the necessary reductions."

Capt. Delgado said the board worked hard to make cuts as far away from the classroom as possible and that the same approach would be necessary if faced with deeper cuts in state aid.

"The approach that we used started as far from the classroom as possible with reductions in everything but programs and teachers," he said. "Only after we exhausted those avenues did we turn to jobs. Only after reducing in all other areas did we need to reduce instructional staff. Our careful attention to this process is evident in the percentages of reductions by categories. Teachers were by far the group with the lowest percentage of reductions."

Ms. Taylor, 54, is an IT business analyst and has served on the Board of Education for four years. She said the district was able to maintain many of its resources in this budget and said it's important to deliver a complete and well-rounded educational experience to students.

"I wanted to see athletic opportunities preserved as much as possible," Ms. Taylor said. "There is a value in athletic programs and not every kid has the same skills. I just wish no one had to lose their job."

Ms. Taylor said it's of vital importance to maintain South Brunswick's high academic standards at an average cost per student that is \$1,806 below the state average.

"I think we're doing a good job now, but with further budget constraints we need to continue to look outside the classroom for further opportunities to scale down the budget," she said. "The governor will try to make more cuts in the future and it's our responsibility to lobby against that and make them aware of what these reductions are doing to our students. We need to help them understand that these decisions are affecting our students."

Ms. Tupe, 51, is a school nurse in North Brunswick and has served on the Board of Education for 15 years. She said this budget was a perfect storm of lost tax rates and cuts in state aid that made this an extremely difficult and challenging year.

"I'm happy we were able to keep the funding and resources focused on the kids and the classroom," Mr. Tupe said. "We were able to keep our core classes and maintain our art and music programs. The number one thing we need to continue to focus on is our mission to educate the children of South Brunswick because education is an investment in children and that affects the value of our homes."

Ms. Tupe said the strong educational reputation built over the years in the district is what attracts many people to move to the township and resources must be committed to maintain the high academic achievement. She said cost containment is extremely important moving forward as a means to deal with deeper aid cuts in the future.

Ms. Tupe said the district will continue to look at energy conservation, shared services in areas of transportation and purchasing and grant programs that will be vital to maximizing the district's resources and keeping costs down. She said the district must have a relationship with the state Legislature to educate members on the financial strains placed on schools by unfunded mandates.

"We've seen this district grow by leaps and bounds and we have adapted to the needs of our community over the years," she said. "We've built up a reputation and it's important to preserve that reputation in this state. We need to keep focused on our mission to educate our students and in this economy we can't lose sight of our mission."

Mr. Boyle, 46, is a business manager with Rutgers University. Mr. Del Piano, 48, is a firefighter in Jersey City. Neither of them returned calls.

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