



MORTON
UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

Sept. 25, 2020

Morton School Board adopts 2021 budget, starts discussion on strategic plan

The Morton District 709 School Board approved a \$42.5 million budget for Fiscal Year 2021 at its Sept. 22 meeting.

The adopted budget anticipates a spending increase of some 7.9 percent over the previous year, primarily due to the district's response to the pandemic, to construction projects and to higher wages.

Those expenditures come against a backdrop of \$39.2 million in expected revenues, with the resulting deficit covered by the district's reserves. Meanwhile, administrators did find some additional savings in health care expenses, purchased services and architectural fees.

The fiscal blueprint for this school year arrived without drama, and the vote was unanimous. Board members had long ago braced themselves for additional outlays with regards to COVID-19, both on safeguards to contain its spread and on additional compensation for staff members who have had higher demands placed upon them, such as remote learning responsibilities.

In addition, final expenditures are being made on several capital projects that are now coming to a conclusion, with the substantial work being done at Morton Junior High School but one example.

The final order of business regarding this year's budget will be the board's approval of a 2021 tax levy in the coming months.

In other business, the board and administration opened discussion on a strategic plan, with the focus clearly aimed at getting as many students as possible back in local classrooms, with in-person instruction considered "the gold standard" of education, said Morton Superintendent Jeff Hill.

"We're in a good position right now to take that next step," specifically with remote learners who are not in a "medical fragile" family situation, said Hill. He noted that the district actually enjoyed a couple of days earlier in the week with zero students absent due to a positive COVID diagnosis. (It was at three student positives as of Friday, Sept. 25, with two staff members out for the same reason.)

In some cases, that's already happening, with conversations ongoing with families who may be struggling with remote learning and may require some intervention prior to semester's end.

"We're not forcing anybody, it's still their choice," said Hill. "If it looks like it's appropriate to invite them back, that's what we're doing."

Meanwhile, district administrators continue to fine tune their blended learning efforts for students out on quarantine, in part through real-time, synchronous learning with their own teachers through the use of technology such as Google Meet. It's important to make these inevitable transitions in and out of classrooms and back in again as "seamless" as possible, said Hill.

One of the real challenges is how to measure learning in this environment, said Troy Teater, director of curriculum and technology for the district. He noted that preliminary standardized test results from last spring -- when schools were closed and remote learning was the only option -- are favorable.

Still, remote learning is far from ideal, it puts a lot of responsibility and stress on families, and many have had trouble engaging, said Teater.

School Board members again had high praise for the administrators and teachers operating in the current environment. School Board President Shad Beaty called

their combined efforts “spectacular, from our standpoint,” so much so that other school boards have reached out to him “to see what’s worked for us.”

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