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SCHODACK

CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



MARCH 2012

Merger Feasibility Report Delayed Until April

To give consultants more time to ensure their information is complete and accurate, the report for the Merger Feasibility Study has been delayed.

When the report is complete, it will be sent to the State Education Department and shared at a public meeting of the Community Advisory Committee as well as with both districts' Boards of Education.

Once the Boards of Education receive the report, they have two main options. They can accept it as a draft which would allow both districts to come together to develop a more detailed plan of programs and costs, or both Boards could decide not to move forward with a merger vote and use the study's data to look at shared services.

If both Boards decide to move forward with a merger vote, the community vote would not occur until the fall to provide school administrators

an opportunity to create a detailed plan for the community to consider.

"The report will provide us a framework of what a merged district could look like but we need to provide our community more if we're going to ask them to vote on a merger," explained Superintendent Robert Horan. "We can't consider asking our community to vote on something this important without providing a detailed plan about programs and costs."

One of the critical considerations in creating a more detailed plan, Mr. Horan noted, is to significantly reduce the cost of what the merger study proposes. At the last Community Advisory Committee meeting, consultants explained how their report would provide a tax decrease for Schodack residents but a sharp increase for Ichabod Crane residents.

"Clearly that is unacceptable to taxpayers as well as school officials. Our

whole goal for this study is to maintain or increase student opportunities in a financially responsible way. If it doesn't do that, we're not considering a merger," Mr. Horan said.

Mr. Horan compared the report to a first draft budget. School officials will use the report as a starting point and look at ways to reduce the cost to a level they hope both communities could support.

"The report is a good framework to start our discussion," said Mr. Horan. "I would like to thank the Community Advisory Committee for all their work that went into this report. They repeatedly raised concerns about the potential cost of the merged district but were told by consultants to focus on programs. When we have the final report, we'll look at how we can best preserve the student opportunities while reducing the overall cost to taxpayers."

Students Raise \$21,858 for Children's Cancer Research



Maple Hill High School students far exceeded their \$4,000 goal at their St. Baldrick's event on March 16, raising \$21,858 to help find a cure for children's cancer.

The event, held in the High School gym, featured more than 60 students, teachers, staff members, community members, principals and school superintendent who volunteered to have their heads shaved.

Maple Hill High School's "Social, Economic and Global Awareness" class, and their teacher Kevin Hunter, organized the event. Volunteers lined up to have their heads shaved as students, faculty and staff gathered around snapping photos and cheering as clumps of hair fell to the floor.

The concept of St. Baldrick's was devised in 1999 by three Irish-American executives from New York City who turned their industry's St. Patrick's Day party into a head-shaving event to benefit kids with cancer.

Maple Hill students wanted to participate and organized the event to raise money for children suffering with cancer and to show their support. The goal started with \$4,000 but the event quickly grew as the community embraced the idea.

"I would like to thank everyone for their support in making our St. Baldrick's event a success," said Mr. Hunter. "Initially, our goal was \$4,000 and with the support of the Schodack community we raised more than \$21,000. This was an awesome event for a great cause."

See a photo slideshow of the event at www.schodack.k12.ny.us.

Fourth Year of State Aid Cuts Means Spending Cuts

Due to a proposed fourth year of state aid cuts, the district faces a projected \$1.5 million budget gap for the 2012-13 school year that will require another year of significant spending reductions.

“We’ve reduced our budget the last three years in a row. We’ll have to make spending reductions again this year,” Superintendent Robert Horan told the Community Budget Advisory Team. “We’re going to stay as positive as possible. It won’t be easy, though. It’s not what we want to do.”

The Board of Education will adopt a budget in April with the community budget vote scheduled for Tuesday, May 15.

Because the district’s revenues are largely fixed due to the state property tax cap, Mr. Horan explained the district has little choice but to reduce spending to close its budget gap. After three years of budget cuts, there is little left to reduce that won’t impact student programs.

“I’m sorry to say we’re going to lose programs next year,” Mr. Horan told students in March. “These decisions are diffi-

cult. They keep us up late at night. We’re trying everything we can to preserve student opportunities. I love programs but our hands are tied.”

The state’s property tax cap formula that school districts are required to use allows the district to increase the tax levy by 2.49%. While the tax cap was touted by elected officials as a “2% tax cap”, the law includes exemptions for expenses out of a district’s control – such as contributions to the state retirement system – and a growth factor that allows municipalities to increase the tax levy by more than 2%.

To minimize the impact of cuts, the district plans to use approximately \$750,000 in fund balance as a revenue. That will help the district get through the difficult budget year but Mr. Horan stressed the district needs to be careful by not taking too much from the reserve.

“Our reserves are like a savings account or rainy day fund,” Mr. Horan explained to students in March. “But we’ve had three years of rainy days and we’re running out of reserves.”



Solar Panel Project Becomes a Reality

Solar panels are now installed on the roofs of all three school buildings as part of a project that saves the district electricity costs at no cost to the district.

Monolith Solar Associates, a solar panel company in East Greenbush, started installing the panels in February after the school district received approval from the state Education Department and NYSERDA.

The solar panels are still being wired into the power system but they are expected to be online within weeks. Once operating, the systems are expected to save the district about \$12,000 a year in electricity costs.

Monolith Solar is installing and maintaining the system and they also own the solar panels. There is no cost to the district. Monolith Solar sells the power generated

back to the district at a 30% rate reduction.

Superintendent Robert Horan explained the solar panels only provide a small portion of the district’s electricity needs but it’s a step in the right direction.

“We’ll take any savings we can get,” said Mr. Horan. “A goal of this project is not only the conservation of electricity and reduced demand from the grid, but also to begin the integration of green technologies into the curriculum at all grade levels K-12, better preparing our students for college and career opportunities.”

Schodack CSD teachers have already met with colleagues from colleges such as the University at Albany’s College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering and Hudson Valley Community College to plan the curriculum.

Follow Schodack CSD on Facebook

As part of the district’s continued efforts to reach out to its community, Schodack Central School District launched a Facebook page in January.

Already, more than 230 community members have “liked” the page, receiving updates about school closings, budget news, student success stories and more.

To follow the district on Facebook, visit us at www.facebook.com/SchodackCSD and “like” the page. There also are links to the page on the district website.



This Facebook page is at no cost to the district. In the last several years, school districts across the country have increasingly used

Facebook to connect with their communities. While many school districts in the Capital Region have them, Schodack CSD was the first district in Rensselaer County to have an official Facebook page.

We hope the Facebook page continues to be one more tool to help our community learn about its schools and get answers to their questions and concerns.



Dirtmeister Visits CES

By 5th Grader Mariella Hirschhoff

Steve Tomecek, also known as the Dirtmeister, came to visit CES on February 29, 2012. He is a scientist and a published children's book author. Some of his books are *Dirt* and *Wing It*.

He came to our school and gave grades K-5 a school wide assembly. In the assembly he did really awesome experiments. He put water in a bottle, taped two bottles together and shook the bottle. There was a tornado in the bottle!

The Dirtmeister stuck a toilet plunger to a piece of glass and had a 2nd grader try to pull it off. The 2nd grader pulled the plunger handle right off! That was because of air pressure. All the kids were roaring with laughter!

The Dirtmeister also had a spring and tied it to an empty coffee can. A 5th grader came up and flicked the spring. It sounded like a phaser shooting from *Star Trek*. The Dirtmeister made the whole school laugh out loud when he told the school his stories. Even the teachers laughed!

After the assembly the Dirtmeister met with all the 5th graders. The 5th graders will be writing a science picture book, so the Dirtmeister gave us some advice. He also told the 5th graders some stories that he didn't tell the rest of the school. He brought in a real dinosaur bone and fools' gold! The fools' gold was really heavy! We had a great day and loads of fun with the Dirtmeister.

Students Challenged to Be Advocates for Education

Maple Hill students were encouraged on March 14 to learn about school budgets so they could be advocates for themselves and younger siblings in the face of continued state cuts to education.

Superintendent Robert Horan, speaking to High School and Middle School students, discussed the financial challenges facing the district and encouraged them to write letters to state legislators about why education is important.

"Be positive, it has more impact," stressed Mr. Horan. "Explain how cuts in education are going to impact you. If you really, really want to make an impact for you and your younger brothers and sisters, you need to be an advocate. It's your future. It's your little brothers' and sisters' future."

Mr. Horan explained how the district's state aid has been cut the past three years in a row. Governor Cuomo has proposed cutting it for next year as well.

While all schools districts are feeling the impact of the state aid cuts, Mr. Horan said small rural schools like

Schodack CSD are impacted the most due to their size.

"I'm sorry to say but you're now going to see programs disappearing. Programs you work hard for that help you get into colleges," said Mr. Horan. "I love programs but our hands are tied."

After reviewing budget concepts such as tax levies, the property tax cap

and sources of district revenue, Mr. Horan asked students questions which they quickly answered. He applauded them for listening and taking the issue seriously.

"Maple Hill students never take the easy way out," said Mr. Horan. "It's something I love about every person in this room."



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Student Artists Have Work Exhibited

March was a busy month for Schodack CSD student artists with their artworks featured in two separate exhibits.

On March 2, MHHS students Brittini Curtin, Matthew Fiebke, Kirsten Geracitano, Samantha Giacomino, Ian Myers, Alicia Rivers-Barton and Caitlin Wemette had their artwork featured at the 13th Annual Juried High School Regional Exhibition at The College of Saint Rose.

On March 14, third graders Olivia Baker and Anthony Penn and seniors Brittini Curtin and Caitlin Wemette had their art featured at the Annual Legislative Art Exhibit in the Capitol Building in Albany.

Congratulations to all our students! To see more photos of student artwork, visit the High School homepage, www.schodack.k12.ny.us/scs/high_school.

Questar III Leases Classroom Space at MHMS

A previously empty classroom at Maple Hill Middle School is no longer empty thanks to a lease the district made with Questar III BOCES for one of its programs, bringing additional revenue into the district.

Questar III's program offers special services for three out-of-district students ages 8- to 10-years-old in the self-contained classroom.

"It's not a lot of money but every little bit helps," said Superintendent Robert Horan. "I'd like to thank Donna Watson and Mike Bennett who initiated conversations with Questar III to utilize empty classroom space we have at the Middle School."

The district has also discussed with Questar III the possibility of using two additional rooms next year as well in a wing of the school that is currently largely unused. While that discussion is still preliminary, the district hopes to work out a similar agreement with Questar III which is looking for space for two life skills programs.

Questar III has similar agreements with many school districts to utilize empty classroom space for their programs which serve students in school districts throughout Rensselaer, Columbia and Greene counties.