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METHUEN SCHOOLS

School budget proposal would result in 76 layoffs

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Tuesday's Methuen School Committee budget meeting was attended by a few dozen teachers and staff at the district.
TEDDY TAUSCHER/

Staff photo



METHUEN — During an excruciating school budget meeting Tuesday night, Superintendent Brandi Kwong presented cuts designed to meet significant budget challenges while still allowing the school to function

Some of the proposed cuts, which would result in 76 layoffs, were based on recommendations from School Committee members and principals. They were proposed to meet increasing financial strains from rising special education costs as well as stunted state aid, and according to some on the School Committee a historical lack of investment in Methuen Public Schools.

There are possible solutions to soften some of the cuts being discussed — a possible increase in school funding from the state and an increased investment by the city — but time is running out for the committee to submit a budget to the City Council.

“The word serious doesn’t even fit,” Mary Beth Donovan-Grassi, committee member and former principal at the Tenney Grammar School, said.

Making the situation even more stressful for educators and district leaders is that while positions have been identified, which staff members will be laid off has yet to be determined. Kwong said it will be a laborious process between the school and union to determine who will be laid off. It might come down to when an employee started at the district, she said.

“We are going to have to make some decisions,” said Kwong. “None of us want any of this on the table.”

Even with the cuts, the proposed school budget is still over what the city is requesting.

The school are facing about \$750,000 more in regular school operating costs and \$1.8 million extra in transportation expenses. Transportation costs have been particularly challenging for officials. After a painstaking review of city streets, district leaders found few routes that could be axed without jeopardizing the safety of students, officials said.

Mayor D.J. Beauregard injected some hope into the proceedings, saying he would work to move one-time school expenses into the main city budget and other “creative ways” to take on more school costs.

“There are still a lot of variables,” he said.

Kwong pointed out that the district has been awaiting news on an extra \$1.6 million in funding from the state for special education costs. But she said Methuen said should be careful not to bank on receipt of the state funds.

“That is not real money for us,” she said. “Would be really irresponsible to put it there.”

Any additional funding, she said will be invested first in the lower grades in order to keep class sizes as small as possible for younger students. Some proposed cuts threaten to increase grade 1 and 2 starting class sizes to as high as 27 students, which could get even higher as new students join the class during the school year.

State Rep. Ryan Hamilton, D-Methuen, was able to secure a roughly \$100,000 earmark for the district.

The budget includes cutting 16 building-based educators. These staff members act as substitute teachers within respective buildings, and they are considered “at-will” employees. Officials have raised the possibilities that some of these staffers could potentially take on paraprofessional positions in the school.

The coming year won’t be the first that positions at the school have been cut. To meet budget constraints this year, the school eliminated 41 positions, though many of the positions were vacant.

Other roles targeted for potential cuts include reading specialists as well as middle school Spanish teachers. Member Kristin Maxwell said the school needs a stronger focus on literacy, not less.

“If we are not teaching our kids to read, then we are not teaching them anything,” said Maxwell.

While Brenna Freitas, an upper school Spanish teacher at the Marsh Grammar school, said the program has not even been given a chance to show its effectiveness.

“We just finished planning the full curriculum,” said Freitas.

Committee member Daniel Shibilia was similarly distraught.

“Methuen does not care about education,” he said. “Prior to this administration, the city has not invested in anything besides police and fire.”

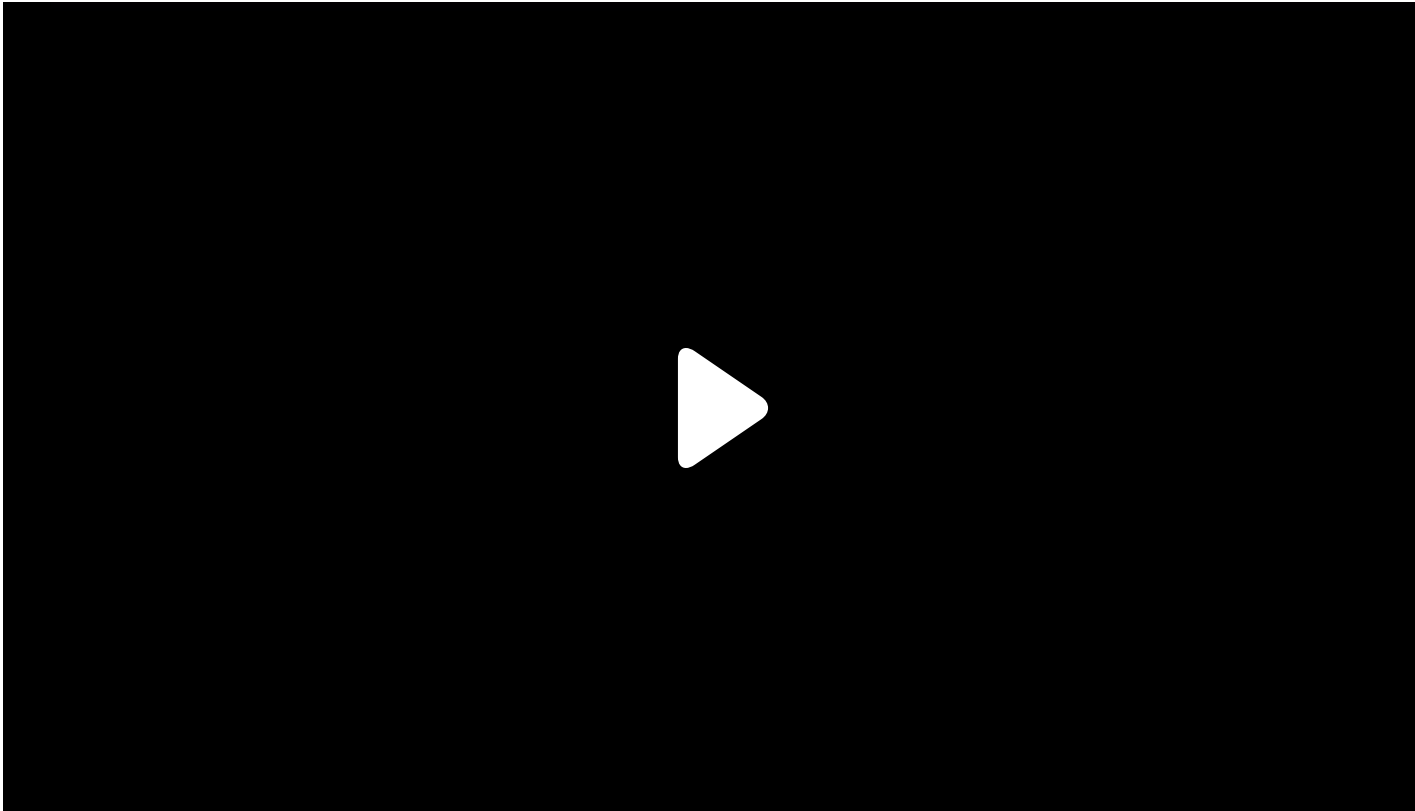
“We can’t bankrupt the city, but we also need to maintain a city,” he said.

Kwong said she would work to find a compromise budget to avoid as many cuts as possible, while keeping in mind the city’s budget limitations. She also reminded officials they were running out of time to make decisions.

“There are definitely things that could change, but there are still steps that have to happen until we know those changes,” she said.

“I think everybody knows me. I am for a good fight and (will) problem solve and figure this out,” she said. “But again, the timing of where we are today is like nothing I have ever experienced in my 23-year career here.”

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