

LTUSD approves \$1.8 million in cuts, teacher layoffs

By Kathryn Reed

It was an all too familiar scene with an all too predictable outcome.

Lake Tahoe Unified School District's board on Tuesday night approved \$1.8 million in budget reductions for the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years, along with reducing certificated employees by 5.688. Board member Sue Novasel was absent.

Board member Judy Cefalu seemed lost in the whole process. She didn't want to vote. It appeared at that moment in the South Tahoe Middle School auditorium the reality of what it means to be a board member struck her. It's not all about site visits to classrooms, construction projects and million-dollar grants to spend.



LTUSD CFO Deb Yates goes over the numbers March 2.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

As board President Wendy David put it, no one wants to cast these votes, but it's the board's job to keep the district

solvent.

Because education funding comes with so many strings, the board is left with the task of explaining to the community how millions of dollars are being spent on new buildings while layoffs and furloughs are in the near future.

The problem is there can be no co-mingling of different funding sources.

LTUSD is dealing with continued reductions in state dollars as well as enrollment that won't stop sliding downward. The last official enrollment number was 3,966 students, but Superintendent Jim Tarwater says it's been dropping 12-15 students a week this calendar year.

With an unemployment rate nearing 17 percent in South Lake Tahoe, Bill's Casino closing, other casinos laying off workers, the city cutting staff, the hospital making cuts – it means families are moving to where the jobs are – which isn't Lake Tahoe.

In California, districts are paid based on average daily attendance. The state has reduced the per pupil allotment from \$6,376 to \$5,186 for the school year starting this fall.

But the cost of doing business doesn't change much – teachers and staff need to be paid, lights turned on, buses filled with gas, paper to write on, pencils to write with.

March 15 is the deadline for the district, per state law, to let teachers know if they'll be hired back next school year. With two resignations coming in this week, the district is hoping others will retire so no pink slips are actually sent out.

Only two of the nearly 60 people at the meeting spoke. Birgit Lukins, who has been in the front office at South Tahoe High School for 16 years, was in tears as she talked about the

possibility of her co-worker losing her job.

"The attendance office is not a one person job," Lukins said. "I would be willing to take a three-day furlough."

That is one of the scenarios the board approved Tuesday. Teachers would lose three staff development days and all staff would be furloughed three days. It would save the district \$285,000.

Based on they only work 180 days, the reduction in pay is 1.3 percent. It would not affect their long-term pay scale or retirement.

It is something that needs negotiating. This will take place in May with the unions after all the sun-setting labor rules are dealt with in April.

If the unions don't agree to the furlough days – something that has occurred for most government workers throughout California – it will mean losing a full time counselor, a maintenance worker and the high school attendance technician Lukins spoke of.

If the governor and Legislature come up with different numbers that are less drastic, the furlough days could be rescinded.

No matter what happens on that front, the board agreed to reduce the reserves from 3 percent to 1.5 percent. This puts that fund at \$500,000.

Board member Larry Green asked if reducing the reserve will affect the district's bond rating. CFO Deb Yates said no.

Tarwater isn't concerned the county or state will force districts to immediately replenish reserves to what is supposed to be a minimum threshold of 3 percent.

"They couldn't enforce it because districts would be bankrupt," Tarwater said.

Some of the other cuts in 2010-11 include: saving \$100,000 by not offering vacation buyouts, losing a person at the district office or everyone taking six furlough days to save \$60,000; reducing elementary office staff hours or cutting a full-time position; cutting from transportation; losing a custodian; not paying the city of South Lake Tahoe for grounds keeping; and reducing stipends for lead teachers.

The district plans to offer a golden handshake (aka pay incentive to retire early) to at least 15 people, which would bring a savings in 2011-12.

On March 9 the school board will be discussing more budget issues. The 2010-11 budget is expected to be adopted in June.