

# Cuts in the works as GVSD seeks to fill \$684K funding shortfall

By Ashleigh Viveiros

Garden Valley School division outlined its preliminary budget plans to those in attendance at its annual public consultation meeting Feb. 28.

While Winkler area taxpayers may be pleased to hear education taxes are slated to go down, it does come at a steep price—trustees have had to cut \$684,000 to make ends meet.

The division is projecting approximately \$519,000 in additional revenue for 2019-2020 in a budget of nearly \$52 million. But that's not nearly enough to cover the expected \$1.2 million in additional expenses.

Those expenses include \$493,000 in new operating costs for the Pine Ridge Elementary School opening in fall, \$605,000 in increased staff wages and benefits, and \$105,000 in other miscellaneous operating expenses.

The board's hands are tied when it comes to taxes, says chair Laurie Dyck, as the Minister of Education has once again ordered school divisions to limit local education property tax increases to two per cent (representing a maximum increase of \$399,000 in GVSD) while also freezing, capping, or phasing out other sources of provincial funding (GVSD receives only an additional \$120,000 from the province for the coming school year).

"We have to absorb operating a whole new building and we weren't given opportunity to be able to tax for that," Dyck said. "Operating expenses like that we can't put into a reserve fund for building a school. This is pure operational [expenses] and it will not go away."

"And the reality is we're still having to keep up with many other things in our buildings, from intercom systems to fire panels to general maintenance. Those pieces come out of our operating budget."

To fill the funding gap, the GVSD board had to make some tough decisions, cutting funds to school program and equipment budgets.

"Our goal was to look at what things can we cut that don't cut people," Dyck said. "That was important to us ... we know we need the staffing, and

so we looked at things instead."

That includes potentially cutting \$60,000 from the school budgets, \$180,000 from the information technology budget tech integration plan, \$274,000 from the bus replacement plan, and \$170,000 from the discretionary staff budget (which allows schools to more quickly hire extra staff when student enrolment spikes).

Local schools are going to feel the pinch in all these areas, but especially when it comes to the lack of new computers and buses, Dyck said.

Computer are a vital part of education today, heavily used by students and staff alike, she noted.

"It's an integral part of how education happens," Dyck said. "What we're proposing is that we're just going to simply going to cut money out of that. And it's just putting off a problem, because the reality is computers don't last forever. They have a lifespan of, if you're lucky, five to eight years, and GVSD has some in that time zone."

Garden Valley's bus fleet, meanwhile, includes several vehicles pushing 20 years of service. The opening of Pine Ridge school also means the division needs to add three new bus routes to its existing system.

No new buses means "drawing out of our spare fleet to help make routes happen," Dyck said. "If we're pulling out of our reserve fleet, that means there's less buses available for extra-curricular activities."

## "Local voices for local choices"

By Ashleigh Viveiros

In addition to outlining some of the challenges Garden Valley School Division is facing when it comes to its 2019-2020 budget, board trustees also took time at the public consultation meeting last week to express concerns about the provincial government's upcoming review of the K-12 education system in Manitoba.

"We've always been in favour of a review," noted Manitoba School Boards Association president Alan Campbell, who was on hand to show GVSD his support.

"We're not adverse to change, but it needs to be positive change for everyone—for students, families, and communities," he said. "And it has to be meaningful in that what comes from the review is indeed going to improve [learning] outcomes."

Comments made by provincial of-



PHOTO BY ASHLEIGH VIVEIROS/VOICE

Manitoba School Boards Association president Alan Campbell, shown here with Garden Valley School Division board chair Laurie Dyck, was on hand for the division's public consultation meeting last week.

One area the division refuses to make cuts is to the ongoing programs related to its strategic goals. That includes its literacy, numeracy, and mental health initiatives, all of which have made great strides in recent years, Dyck said.

"The reality is, we have a lot of good data showing the impact [these programs] have had," she said. "The machine is moving in the right direction ... so, no, we didn't want to cut that."

Enrolment in GVSD is not expected

to significantly change this fall, but there will be a projected 4,511 students attending classes in the division.

As for taxpayers, Garden Valley is proposing a mill rate of 15.02, which represents a 0.42 per cent drop from the current year. Residential, commercial, and agricultural education taxes will all go down as a result.

The board will firm up its budget plans this week in advance of passing it at its March 12 meeting.

officials in recent months have left trustees worried Manitoba is heading down a path toward removing local school boards via amalgamation or centralization.

An amalgamated school board attempting to service a much larger region would struggle to accurately reflect the concerns and values of the local community, stressed GVSD board chair Laurie Dyck.

"Local voice, it's crucial. It's our democratic voice at the table," she said. "And it represents our communities."

Having one big division overseeing, for example, the entirety of southern rural Manitoba would be unwieldy, Dyck fears.

"How do you begin to give leadership to that in an effective and meaningful way that reflects your communities?" she said. "We all have different value bases, we all

have different cultures."

Not only do nearly 70 per cent of rural Manitobans want to keep local school boards (as per a poll conducted by Probe Research last fall), but, GVSD trustees asserted in their presentation, there would also be no real financial benefit to eliminating them.

"It's would be easy to ask a question that says, 'Would you like your taxes reduced by eliminating school boards?'" said trustee John P. Klassen. "How many people wouldn't say yes?"

In reality, Manitoba's school boards cost just half a cent on every dollar spent in education today. Ninety-six cents (and it's closer to 97 cents in GVSD, he noted) of every dollar spent on education goes directly to providing students with programs,

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# Rogers presents \$15K to Big Bros. Big Sis.



PHOTO BY ASHLEIGH VIVEIROS/VOICE

Rogers Hometown Hockey MC Kyle Bутtenham (far right) presented Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Pembina Valley's Michael Penner and Kerri Bennett with a donation of \$15,000 last week.

By Ashleigh Viveiros

Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Pembina Valley got an unexpected but very welcome funding boost thanks to the Rogers Hometown Hockey tour.

Just a few days before the weekend festivities took over downtown Winkler, Rogers reps stopped in at the mentoring agency's offices to present executive director Michael Penner with a donation of \$15,000.

"It was a big surprise ... a great surprise," Penner said, noting he was blown away when the company contacted him about the unsolicited donation.

"It's a huge boost for us," he continued. "We were projecting a bit of a loss this year, but with this grant obviously it won't be anymore."

The extra money also means the agency, which currently caters to the Morden-Winkler-Altona area, can get the ball rolling on adding Carman to its service area.

"Recently we've been approached by Carman to start in-school pro-

grams there," Penner said. "We were working on that slowly, waiting to see if the funds would be there ... now we have some funds to pursue that and also to continue expanding in our current communities, too."

Kaitlyn LeFeaver, community investment manager for Rogers Communications, said the company has making a financial gift like this at each of the Rogers Hometown Hockey stops across the nation this winter.

"Recognizing the importance of giving back to our communities, the Ted Rogers Community Grants help support educational programs that enable youth to succeed inside and outside of the classroom," she said. "As part of Rogers Hometown Hockey, we support local community programs focused on inspiring youth to continue their education."

Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Pembina Valley was selected "to support their youth mentoring programs to change the course of young lives."

## Roland band workshop March 16

The 22nd annual Roland Community Band Workshop takes over the Roland United Church next weekend.

Forty-four musicians and counting have signed up for the workshop taking place on Saturday, March 16 from 9:45 a.m. to 9 p.m.

This day-long reading session under the direction of Bernard Helfter is open to all adults and senior students with a band instrument and music in their souls, said organizer Tom Neufeld.

Music selections will range from easy to challenging, he said, and it's always a great day of music.

The event wraps up with a public concert at 7 p.m. at the church hall.

For more information or to register, call 1-204-343-2358 or email TomLori@mymts.net.

You can also check out more about the event on its Facebook page: Roland Community Band Workshop.

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The student population that had already jumped to 1,885 as of last September had further risen to 1,925 as of January. It's forecasted to hit 2,029 by 2020.

As well, there will be some increased support time as well as some extra literacy and numeracy programming.

Other initiatives highlighted in the financial plan included opening up Minnewasta School for community use in the evenings and small increases in funds for professional development and for school advisory councils.

Overall, around 77 per cent of spending goes toward salaries—an increase of 2.5 per cent—with another 5.5 per cent going towards benefits—an increase of 7.5 per cent. Another seven per cent of spending comes under instructional support, while 6 per cent is for transportation and operations.

Fransen feels the division is well positioned to meet the challenges of continued growth, though there is also uncertainty about what the future holds with the provincial review of the educational system.

The province is holding their cards close to their chest, he said, though many wonder if it is leading to an amalgamation or even

elimination of local divisions.

"I think it's very important that people in Manitoba learn about what the impact is of the education review and what some of the proposed changes would do," Fransen said.

"When we're looking at the potential of amalgamating school divisions, especially in rural Manitoba, we've

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supports, and services, leaving about 3.5 per cent for administrative costs—an amount far outweighed by the value provided by local school boards, Klassen said.

In 2001-2002, 20 Manitoba school divisions were eliminated by the NDP government in a bid to save millions of dollars. But a study by the Frontier Institute for Public Policy in 2005 found this move resulted in virtually no savings, Klassen said. Instead, it simply removed the ownership of public schools from the communities they serve.

Fellow trustee Leah Klassen pointed out local control over education tax dollars means the division is able to more accurately tailor its programs, services, and facilities to the community's needs.

In GVSD, that has included things like funding for literacy and numer-

acy programs, winter busing, school renovations, technical vocational and alternative education programs, and partnerships with other educational projects in the community.

"As a local board, we have the ability to make decisions based on local values," she said. "That comes with meeting with our parents, meeting with our constituents, and knowing what matters most to them."

GVSD is asking people to contact their elected representatives, including Premier Brian Pallister and Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen, to weigh in on the importance of local school divisions in Manitoba.

"The more they hear that we care, it's going to have an impact," Dyck said. "We can't sit back and be passive aggressive and hope for the best."

Further details are available online at gvsd.ca.