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Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)

May 20, 1999

Section: SOUTH JERSEY**Edition:** CNEW JERSEY**Page:** B06

CHERRY HILL SCHOOL BOARD MAKES ALL ITS CUTS IN MAINTENANCE

Jennifer Farrell, INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Ignoring recommendations from the Township Council to trim administration and software expenses for the next school year, the school board has voted to slash \$1.56 million from the building maintenance budget - a move that sparked resentment among those who campaigned for the district's \$52.6 million bond issue for repairs and improvements.

The 6-3 vote Tuesday night came one week after the council cut the district's failed \$100.8 million budget to \$99.2 million. Voters had rejected the original plan by a ratio of nearly 2-1 last month.

The council suggested paring \$1.16 million from maintenance, \$300,000 from administrative expenses, and \$100,000 earmarked for student-management software.

But Superintendent Morton Sherman advised the board to cut the full amount from maintenance, saying money for facilities could be increased in later budgets. "I would rather have a piece of ceiling tile fall from the classroom than cut one child's program," he said.

Board members were divided on the issue, with Cindy Trubin, David Oberlander and

Keith Herman voting against the cuts. Trubin and Herman also argued for an appeal of the council's decision to state officials.

"We can't afford the cut that was asked of us," Trubin said.

Others agreed that the budget defeat signaled the community's will to reduce school spending.

"I feel that we should accept the vote, make the best of it, and move on," board member Pat Koper said.

The revised budget will add 3.8 cents to the school-tax rate, or about \$53 to the current \$2,556 school-tax bill for a home assessed at the township average of \$140,000.

Bond supporters lined up at the microphone to remind the board that the public overwhelmingly supports building maintenance - as shown by the March 2 passage of the bond issue, the district's first in 30 years. By contrast, they said, three out of the last six school budgets have failed.

"Isn't there anywhere else in \$99 million where we can find cuts?" said Mark Markos, who worked for the bond after serving on the district's building committee. "You have made it the sacrificial lamb."

During its campaign to pass the bond issue, board members promised to set aside \$2.7 million next year for maintenance, but at a series of budget workshops they discussed trimming the figure to \$2.2 million or \$1.9 million.

The revised budget would set spending at \$1.2 million.

Anthony DePasquale, another bond advocate, said he had persuaded voters to support the bond issue based on the district's promise to spend more on maintenance and keep buildings from deteriorating.

"The bond was to fix the buildings," he said. "We sold it on maintenance."

Proposed reductions include roof repairs and electrical upgrades at Kingston Elementary, wall repairs at Cherry Hill High School East and Beck Middle School, window replacements at Sharp Elementary, and macadam replacement at Carusi Middle School.

At next month's meeting, the board said, it will revise the budget to accommodate recommendations from the district's task force on violence.

Board President Andrew McIlvaine said he hopes to find a way to put some of the projects back in the budget, but added that the district is faced with tough decisions. "We are \$1.56 million short of where we were when we adopted the budget," he said. "It has to come from someplace."

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