

Towns Challenge New Jersey Voters' Wishes

By Winnie Hu
The New York Times
May 27, 2010

After years of frustration over school taxes, New Jersey residents turned out in record numbers last month to reject 58 percent of their school districts' budget proposals, sounding an unmistakable protest.

But in the weeks since, many of the 316 defeated budgets have been adopted with few, if any, changes by municipal councils, where members risked thwarting the will of voters — and incurring their wrath — rather than cut sports, lay off teachers or increase class sizes.

In Ridgewood, an affluent village in Bergen County known for its schools, the Council whittled \$100,000 from the proposed \$84.9 million budget, or 0.1 percent. Average savings to taxpayers: \$12 per year.

In Woodbridge, a working-class township in Middlesex County, the Council shaved \$1 million — 0.5 percent — from a \$182.5 million budget, saving taxpayers an average of \$25 each. And in Parsippany-Troy Hills, in Morris County, where the school budget had been voted down for the second consecutive year, the Council trimmed \$800,000 — 0.6 percent — from a nearly \$127 million spending plan (the average savings is \$52).

“To have the Village Council go through and save a dollar a month is a joke,” said Greg May, 39, a recording engineer who is among the 25,000 residents of Ridgewood. “It almost makes me feel like what good was my vote? I think that’s the general consensus.”

State law requires that any rejected school budgets be reviewed by the municipal council, and adopted or amended within about a month. State education officials said they would not announce until next week the overall results of these reviews, but interviews in communities across New Jersey showed that in many districts, the process had divided council members and school leaders, while drawing fire from residents.

In a year of huge reductions in state education aid, many of the council members struggled to find a compromise between those outraged by high taxes and those worried about cuts to the classroom.

“Going into this, we knew whatever we do is not going to make either side happy,” said James Major, president of the Woodbridge Council, who said he had lost sleep at night from the pressure. “As a governing body, you try to hear all sides of it. You become a little Solomon-like in trying to make a decision.”

While a council can leave a failed budget intact, most do not for fear of looking as if they have disregarded voters. School districts can appeal cuts made by the council to the State Education Department within 10 working days; last year, there were two appeals.

To be sure, there were places where the councils seemed to heed the voters' call. In Teaneck, where the budget was rejected by a vote of 4,790 to 3,618, the Council cut a record \$6.1 million (6.4 percent) from the \$94.9 million spending plan, eliminating assistant principals and most other administrators and their support staff. The Council in West Orange, in Essex County, where the budget was defeated by a vote of 3,947 to 3,176, carved \$2.5 million (2.1 percent) from a \$118 million budget proposal, depleting surplus funds and cutting back on administrative services and building repairs.

In Woodbridge, where the budget was rejected by a vote of 6,350 to 4,734, Mr. Major said he and the eight other Council members spent weeks poring over budget items line by line, with every intention of cutting because "we felt that the people spoke loud and clear and they needed to be heard."

But in the end, Mr. Major said, they could find no more than \$1 million to take away from a cash-poor district that has long gone without things taken for granted in many schools, like full-day kindergarten or lacrosse and field hockey teams. He said that further reductions would have hurt core programs, which, in turn, would have brought down property values.

In some towns, the council itself was deeply divided over the process. Parsippany-Troy Hills, where the budget was rejected by a vote of 3,773 to 3,431, hired an auditor who recommended \$1.4 million in reductions. But three of the five council members voted to cut little more than half that amount after students and parents lobbied hard to keep full-day kindergarten and middle-school sports.

"I wanted the \$1.4 million and more," said Councilman John Cesaro, 39, one of the dissenters, who argued that a larger reduction would be possible if school employees gave up part of their raises next year. "My words fell on deaf ears because the unions feel a sense of entitlement, when the rest of the taxpayers are losing their jobs and being asked to contribute more for health care."

But LeRoy Seitz, the Parsippany-Troy Hills superintendent, said school financing was not just about controlling costs at the local level, but also about identifying alternatives at the state level, like a sales tax on luxury goods or a higher income tax on the wealthy.

"I tell people that property tax relief has to come from Trenton; it doesn't come from defeating your local school budget," said Dr. Seitz, who called the current system "a regressive tax that hurts those who can least afford to pay."

Even those who can afford to pay are no longer so willing. In Ridgewood, which has long drawn the families of Wall Street executives, people have begun to express frustration at recent school board meetings over what they see as teachers unwilling to make sacrifices like everyone else in a tough economy.

Ridgewood's school budget was defeated, by a vote of 2,639 to 2,537, for the first time since 2003. Afterward, school officials identified \$100,000 in lower-than-expected transportation costs, and the Council decided not to seek any further reductions. (The district had already planned to lay off 21 teachers and 33 classroom aides to offset an expected \$3 million reduction in state aid.)

The result: the average tax bill will increase by \$355 instead of \$367.

James Foytlin, 48, who runs a popular Web site, The Ridgewood Blog, said there was now talk in town of recalling members of the Council. "It's just ridiculous," he said of the \$100,000 cut. "I'm sure the school board spends more on paper clips."

Even so, the \$100,000 cut was still too much for one councilman, Paul S. Aronsohn, 43, a public relations consultant, who wanted to reduce the municipal budget rather than school spending to lower property taxes. "I felt like the budget was being balanced on the backs of students," he said. "I completely understand the need for tax relief, but I don't think we should take it all out of the schools."

Patrick A. Mancuso, another member of the Council, acknowledged that the \$100,000 cut would make little difference, but said it was a start. He has asked village and school officials to begin looking for ways to save money in the 2011-12 budget by sharing equipment and services like vehicle and property maintenance.

"People say, 'Are you kidding?' " he said. "At least we're trying to demonstrate that we hear you, we're going to try harder, we're going to start now, and that's important."