

School advocates give council an earful at budget meeting

Reversal of consensus could lead to school funding cut

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THOMASVILLE | Teachers, administrators and supporters of Thomasville City Schools convened on the city council chambers Monday night to implore officials not to cut the school supplemental tax rate by a penny in the coming fiscal year's budget.

Superintendent Daniel Cockman was the first in a long line of speakers affiliated with the system to protest city staff's proposal of the reduction, which would take the rate down from 18 cents to 17 cents per \$100 valuation.

"That penny represents about \$83,000 to Thomasville City Schools," Cockman said, later adding that such an action "sends the message that education is kind of second fiddle around here."

At a budget work session in late April, Cockman made his case to the council for keeping the supplemental schools tax rate at 18 cents. He said Tuesday morning that when he left that meeting, he was under the impression the council was in agreement not to make the cut, which had been scheduled in the city's biennial budget last year. The council would thus have to intervene to keep the cut from taking effect.

Cockman said he later learned from City Manager Kelly Craver that four members of the city council decided to reverse their positions, consequently changing the council's consensus. Craver said that the meeting that gave the original consensus on keeping the supplemental tax at 18 cents had been full of cross-talk and lively discussion, resulting in some council members being dissatisfied with its outcome.

"I had some council members leave that meeting confused as to the procedure," Craver said.

The concerned attendees at Monday's special budget session, therefore, hoped to sway the opinion of the board definitively.

The session, called at the council's last regular meeting in May, was meant for the sole purpose of taking public input; as such, neither the city council nor members of the city staff responded to public comments during the open session, which ran about 90 minutes.

The vast majority of that time was used by advocates for the schools, about 50 of whom attended the meeting, many of them clad in Bulldog red as a show of solidarity. As the hearing wore on, they began applauding each speaker who approached the podium to implore the council to reconsider the cut.

"To do this to our children would be a failure, and to fail our children would be to fail Thomasville," said Michele Brown Hill, PTO president at Thomasville Primary School, to vocal agreement from the audience.

Stanford Ray, who works in dropout prevention with TCS, noted that 85 percent of its students are on free or reduced lunch to underscore the importance of city funds. He noted that despite the high poverty rate in the system, Thomasville High School students had received more than \$1 million in scholarship funds this year alone and named some of the achievements of the school's alumni.

"We as a system strive to make sure every child has a chance to be successful," Ray said.

Scott Styers, a TCS parent with a background in human resources, framed the issue in a different way, saying the same employers the city was trying to recruit would be alarmed at any cut in school funding. An educated, well-trained work force, he said, was a major factor in many businesses deciding to locate in the city.

"Cutting school funding, especially at this time, sends the wrong message to those employers," Styers said.

Only one speaker, government watchdog Barney W. Hill, spoke in favor of lowering the tax, advocating a more drastic cut than the council has considered up to now.

"For the 20th year in a row, I speak in favor of a school supplemental tax of zero," Hill said, ridiculing the idea that government funding is tied to student achievement.

"If a child in (Cockman's) system fails, it must be because Washington or Raleigh didn't send a big enough check," Hill said.

The council also heard from Mary Elliott, who offered a lengthy presentation on what she characterized as excessive salaries being paid to a number of city employees. She said the city was not following its own salary study, and that according to her analysis, workers were being paid from 5 to 15 percent above the suggested salary in addition to cost-of-living adjustments.

Elliott suggested the council put a salary freeze into effect and said the city should suspend merit raises for anyone at the top of their position's pay scale.

Craver said his office had not received a copy of Elliott's figures prior to the meeting and he, therefore, had no comment on them.

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