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*For immediate release*

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## **OA BOARD OF EDUCATION DECIDES TO PUT REVISED BUDGET UP FOR 2<sup>ND</sup> VOTE JUNE 21**

*New version cuts tax levy increase from 1.95 percent to 1.51 percent*

**OWEGO** – Members of the Owego Apalachin Board of Education, at their June 2 special meeting, unanimously voted to put a revised version of the district’s 2011-2012 budget up for a second vote. OA’s initial budget was defeated by 30 votes on May 17. OA voters will be asked to return to the polls June 21 to vote on this revised budget.

This iteration of the OA budget is similar to the first proposal put forth for voter consideration. This one, however, reduces the tax levy increase to 1.51 percent. The initial budget contained a 1.95 percent tax levy hike. The budget currently up for consideration has been reduced by \$67,853.

“Our board decided to reduce our budget by exactly the amount and the kind of reductions that would be required by a contingency budget under New York state law,” said Dr. Bill Russell, OA superintendent. “In our case that means, out of our \$41,051,045 budget, we have removed more than \$67,0000 – cutting some expenses in the area of administration, allowing no purchase of new athletic uniforms, and a reducing \$62,165 for capital equipment.”

Owego Apalachin’s initial budget proposal contained the fourth-lowest tax levy increase in the Broome-Tioga BOCES region. The OA board’s decision to decrease that number from 1.95 percent to 1.5 percent would bring OA’s tax levy increase to the region’s third-lowest.”

The revised budget proposal cuts \$732,556 in expenditures compared to the 2010-11 budget, which was held flat compared to the previous year. “That means this proposed budget is substantially lower than the budget approved two years ago,” Dr. Russell noted.

“When you factor in the large increases in mandated expenses, like pension and health care costs, we actually cut more than \$2.5 million from this budget.

“We cut more out of our year-to-year expenditures than all but three other school districts in the region,” Dr. Russell said, “and we also proposed to use a substantial amount of our reserves and fund balance, so our board felt that we’d done a very serious job in our original proposal. Still, we heard from many voters that it wasn’t yet satisfactory.

“In making its decision, however, our board was very leery about cutting too much more because our long-term projections lead us to believe we will be forced to cut deeply next year. And the year after that. And again, the year after that.”

Several board members noted at the most recent meeting that the board has a responsibility to the taxpayers and voters, but it also has fiscal responsibility for the school district and its long-range financial health. And, of course, its primary responsibility is to provide quality education programs for the children in the community.

“We hope that our voters will understand that we believe this is the best budget we can put forward,” Dr. Russell said. “This is already an austerity budget. If it fails on June 21, we will go to a state-mandated contingency budget, which will look identical to this one.”

There will be one big difference, though, explained Dr. Russell. That difference could be far-reaching.

“The primary reason the board took this action is because there’s an ironic twist to New York state law as it applies to schools,” Dr. Russell said. “Districts are required to allow communities access to school facilities because, after all, they belong to the community. Taxpayers paid for their construction, they’ve paid for their maintenance and upkeep, and they’ve paid for their improvement. While it varies from year to year, we allow as many as 150 groups from our community to use our facilities every year, and in most cases without charge.

“If we are under a contingency budget, however, schools are required, by law, to charge those same groups for the use of the facilities. So, it just reverses the normal circumstance, and our board is very much opposed to that. The board would prefer to continue to allow the OA community to have expansive access to our playing fields, our gyms, our classrooms, our cafeterias, and our auditorium.”

A list of community groups that have used the district’s buildings and grounds appears on the OA Web site’s front page, included with an article from November 2010’s *OA News*, the district newsletter. The OA Web site is [www.oacsd.org](http://www.oacsd.org).

“Let me give you a couple of examples of such groups,” Dr. Russell said. “One private organization runs a summer program called Camp Ahwaga for disabled students. They are allowed to use our facilities for the camp.”

Dr. Russell said that representatives for Camp Ahwaga have said that if they are required start paying rental fees to use the schools, they would be forced to cancel the program.

“That would be a disaster for those kids who need that great program,” Dr. Russell said.

“The Relay for Life was just on campus for the American Cancer Society,” he added. “It would be criminal to have to start charging them. The senior softball league that uses our playing fields; the Lockheed Martin basketball league that goes on for two or three months during the year; the Boys & Girls Club before- and after-school daycare program. These and many more programs would certainly be affected if we had to go to a contingency budget. Unfortunately, in some cases, these programs would be forced to discontinue.

“We feel these programs are a very important ingredient in what makes our schools the heart of our community,” he said, “and our board was dead set against moving directly to a contingency budget that required us to charge additional fees to groups that have, frankly, already paid, year after year, through their property taxes.”

Dr. Russell said that in the weeks following the initial budget vote, the district has analyzed voter responses to try to determine why the budget failed in the May 17 vote.

“We asked a question in a survey of voters, ‘How would you rate the quality of the schools in this district?’ Fully 88 percent of the people who responded said they thought the quality of our schools and the education in the district was either good or excellent,” Dr. Russell said. “That’s overwhelming support for our schools.

“A super-majority – more than 60 percent – said they believed our tax increase (1.95 percent) was acceptable,” he continued. “So it was a bit of a conundrum for us to figure out what was going on.

“The single most common reason cited by ‘no’ voters was that taxes, in general, are too high,” Dr. Russell said, “and I think anybody who lives in New York knows that that’s a familiar refrain. Our voters, in an exit poll, didn’t seem to say the tax increase from this year’s budget was too high, but that their overall taxes were too high. In this scenario, the schools are the one place where voters get to express that sentiment.”

A public hearing for this budget vote will be held at 7 p.m. June 14 at Owego Elementary School, 1 Christa McAuliffe Lane, Owego.

On June 21, polling places at Owego Apalachin Middle School and Apalachin Elementary School will be open from noon to 9 p.m.

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