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City BOE panel pushes for 2.93% budget hike

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MERIDEN — After receiving no increase from the city for the school budget last year, the Board of Education's Finance Committee voted unanimously to recommend to the full board an increase of 2.93 percent for the upcoming fiscal year.

With the 2.93 percent increase, however, 37 positions would still need to be eliminated across the school district, bringing the total of cut positions to well over 100 for the last four years.

Those positions include 21 certified positions, a pre-kindergarten teacher, nine special education staff members, a science teacher on special assignment, eight elementary reading or literacy facilitators and two math facilitators. There are also seven classified positions and nine unidentified positions.

Twenty-eight of the positions are funded through grants worth more than \$2.7 million that will run out at the

end of the current fiscal year. "We said that if those funds got eliminated, the positions sponsored by those funds would have to be eliminated," said committee Chairman Thomas Bruenn, recalling last year's budget debate. "That's what you did, for the most part."

School Superintendent Mark D. Benigni said with percentages of grants funding positions, it made some cuts difficult, but Associate Superintendent Robert Angeli said value of the positions were weighed and those positions can be lost if the money is also lost.

The 2.93 percent increase would mean a rise of more than \$2.92 million in the budget, bringing it over \$102 million.

Assistant School Superintendent Michael Grove said there is potential for a change in health insurance benefits, including savings if a switch is made by the city from Anthem to CIGNA.

Though the committee voted unanimously, each

member expressed concerns, as did members of other boards. Committee member John Lineen said he fears being hit with a zero percent increase again rather than the eventual suggestion that could be an increase of almost three percent.

"That's another 30 positions (that could be cut)," Lineen said. "There's a very good likelihood it could be zero again."

Committee member Kevin Scarpati said sitting through last year's meetings made him realize that asking for a nearly three percent increase could still be too much, though he said he was "disgusted" to suggest such a thing, it was being "realistic."

Robert Kosienski Jr., a board member not serving on the committee, said it may be time to take a stand and suggest something higher, which he will vouch for at the upcoming board meeting Jan. 18.

"We need to take into consideration what the school system actually needs,"

Kosienski said. "We have to ask for what we need to operate school system on daily basis."

Kosienski suggested an increase in the budget of about 6.6 percent, which would allow the district to maintain what it currently has and save some extra money. Fellow board member Michael Cardona agreed. "We need to talk about how to make system grow; that's what we want," Cardona said. "To ask for (2.93 percent), if the city council were to give us zero (percent) again, it would be an abomination."

Another large increase will be in the area of supplies and material, but will come because of an increase of cost for oil, which the city expects to rise up to 70 cents per gal-

city district has only seen a

In contrast to districts in 2.9 percent increase since the the surrounding areas, the 2008-09 fiscal year, while