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Pennoyer School stares down steep budget cuts: "We have done everything we can do"

By Caroline Kubzansky
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FEEDBACK

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Pennoyer School District 79 Superintendent Kristin Kopta in one of Pennoyer School's classrooms that doesn't have floor tiles. The district just lost its sixth referendum and is facing serious budget cuts. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

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The Pennoyer School District 79 Board of Education on Wednesday began looking at budget cuts after voters rejected the district's sixth referendum request in eight years, at a third the size of the original ask.

"We have looked at it 50 different ways," Board President Sheila Wachholder said Wednesday night. "We are going to have to start making reductions in various areas."

There are two problems facing the district, which only has one school: the Pennoyer School, an elementary and middle school at Foster and Cumberland Avenues that serves about 450 students from Norridge, Harwood Heights and unincorporated Norwood Park Township.



Pennoyer School District 79 president Sheila Wachholder during Wednesday evening meeting, December 14, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney for the Pioneer Press) (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

The first issue is voters' [rejection of a \\$7.9 million referendum](#) that would have funded lead pipe replacements, accessibility changes and a replacement to the Pennoyer School's fire alarm system.

The board hasn't yet decided whether they'll go back out to voters with the referendum in the April 4 election, Superintendent Kristin Kopta said.

The November referendum failed by fewer than 100 votes and would have added about \$260 to the average tax bill. It was a third the size of the original referendum ask of \$25 million.

The second problem is that the school's fund balances are beginning to tip into the danger zone. Last fiscal year's audit showed that Pennoyer had an operating deficit of just under

\$400,000 and had 35 days' worth of cash on hand due to late payments from state and federal channels, Kopta said.



Pennoyer School District 79 superintendent Kristin Kopta speaks during Wednesday evening's school board meeting, December 14, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

The recommended minimum amount of cash on hand for school districts to have is 180 days, or six months' worth. To get to that amount of cash on hand, the district would need to save \$2,787,480.

The district has drawn on its reserves to address some of the issues with the building, which was built in 1950s, like fixing plumbing and making security upgrades. It's also used federal COVID relief money to replace much of the HVAC system throughout the building, although the gym and multipurpose rooms still need to have that work done.

But the projects that still need addressing — including replacing the building's original fire alarm system and installing an elevator so people who use wheelchairs can access the upper floor — will run almost \$4 million, Kopta estimated.

Compounding both of those problems is the fact that the district took out short-term loans in order to make payroll while it waited to receive long-delayed property tax revenues this year from Cook County. Kopta said those loans, while necessary, cost the district an extra \$14,000 in interest and fees.

All this has led the board to have “a conversation none of us really wants to have,” Wachholder said.

Board members are holding out hope for a referendum to get approved in the future but said they can no longer count on community support for funding improvements to the school.

Among the reductions the board discussed were eliminating extracurriculars like sports, which Kopta said “blows my mind,” combining class sizes and reducing kindergarten to half days to eliminate staff positions.

Kopta told Pioneer Press that salary freezes and eliminating arts and music programming were also possibilities.

But the list of things to cut is short, and all of the cuts will make an impact on the identity of the school, officials said.

“We really don't have a lot to reduce,” Kopta said. “We don't have a lot of fluff.”

Mark Klaisner, executive director of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, called the situation at Pennoyer “a little bit of a perfect storm.”

People move to the area because the low taxes appeal to them, Klaisner said. Add that to low corporate tax revenues and a small school population that caps how much state funding Pennoyer is eligible for and the road to increased funding is already rocky.

But school administrators and board members stressed over and over on Wednesday that the school was running out of time to find money, cut funding or face state control of the district.

In cases where a school district is in dire financial straits, the Illinois State Board of Education is empowered to form an oversight board for the district and approve its financial decisions.

That possibility did not sit well with school board member David Tarjan, who feared that state officials would make reductions and cut costs without regard for the community whose children the school serves.

“They’re going to be experts on balancing a spreadsheet, let’s be honest,” Tarjan said. “They’ll just cut [the budget] and move on to the next project.”



Pennoyer School District 79 secretary David Tarjan speaks during Wednesday evening's school board meeting, December 14, 2022. (Brian O'Mahoney for the Pioneer Press) (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

Klaisner agreed, telling board members that a state oversight situation would also be time-consuming because every decision would need to go through an extra approval process.

The board plans to meet in the next month for a special board meeting to discuss cuts in further detail so they can begin taking action on reductions at the January or February board meeting.

