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Quality public education is at stake as RETSD board unanimously approves 2023–24 budget

(March 8, 2023) The River East Transcona School Division board of trustees unanimously approved a \$224 million budget on March 7, 2023. Faced with growing student enrolment, increasing student needs, and skyrocketing inflation, the board made difficult decisions to make up for a continued operating funding shortfall from the government.

Over the past four years, RETSD has practised due diligence in managing budgets with ever decreasing provincial funding. With rising costs in everything from school buses to paper supplies, this budget is the leanest it can be without causing deep cuts in the classroom.

“At the centre of every budget decision is our students,” said Colleen Carswell, board chair. “But quality education is at stake if we’re forced to continue to cut. We’ve found efficiencies in the budget, such as deferring maintenance in schools, but this is not a long-term solution to chronic underfunding.”

The operating surplus was depleted over the past number of years to compensate for underfunding and the fallout of the government’s ill-fated Bill 28, and due to a deficit 2022–23 budget of \$3.6 million. Therefore, there is no cushion to cover unforeseen expenses, plus little ability to replenish the surplus for future needs.

School divisions can no longer tax and, therefore, cannot seek additional revenue. As a result, the school division needed to identify efficiencies, because the funding announcement fell short of the 8 per cent increase RETSD required. These efficiencies also led to an ability to keep up with increasing enrolment and instructional pressures by including 14 new teaching positions, increasing student services allocations, and improving technology for teaching.

However, RETSD will be taking the extraordinary step of borrowing funds to cover one-time costs such as a student information system and transportation software among others. Borrowing for operational expenses has not happened in RETSD in the last 20 years—not since before amalgamation of the River East School Division and the urban portion of the Transcona-Springfield School Division. And while this loan will be paid back over the next five years, it is not a step the board of trustees takes lightly.

“Our government must step up and provide a fair, equitable, and adequate funding model to allow public education to thrive, otherwise next year we will be forced to make deep cuts in the classroom, something we do not want to do,” said trustee Rod Giesbrecht, finance committee chair.

Fast facts:

River East Transcona is the second largest school division in the province with over 17,989 students in 42 schools staffed by approximately 3,000 team members. The school division is expecting at least 500 new students to join the division this fall.

The division receives approximately 57.5 per cent of its revenue from provincial government program support, 6.3 per cent from the provincial government property tax credit, and another 35.6 per cent from the local property tax base. The remaining 0.6 per cent comes from other revenue sources.

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