

## State budget gives boost to Bucks schools

By: **KORI WALTER** (Tue, Jul/17/2007)

HARRISBURG —This year's state budget was worth the wait, some Bucks County state lawmakers said Monday.

The state Senate approved a nearly \$27.5 billion spending plan, which would increase state basic education aid for Bucks school districts by about 2 percent for the 2007-2008 school year.

The state House of Representatives started debating the spending plan late Monday night and was expected to send the measure to Gov. Ed Rendell's desk — more than two weeks past the June 30 budget deadline.

Sen. Charles T. McIlhinney, R-10, joined his GOP colleagues in celebrating passage of a budget that does not increase statewide taxes or fees.

In his February budget address, Rendell had proposed raising the state sales tax, increasing fees paid by waste haulers, imposing a fee on companies that do not provide health insurance for employees and a surcharge on electric bills.

None of those increases will be enacted under the budget, which increases spending by about 4.5 percent.

"When you were looking at the governor announcing early on that he wanted to raise a lot of taxes for a lot of programs, I knew that this was going to be a tough battle," McIlhinney said, referring to the prolonged budget impasse. "I thought overall it was a pretty good package. I thought we did a pretty good job."

Statewide, basic education funding will climb by about 3.5 percent.

Although some may consider a 2 percent increase in basic education funding paltry for Bucks schools, Sen. Robert "Tommy" Tomlinson, R-6, said students will benefit from increased spending on pre-kindergarten classes and laptop computers.

Gov. Ed Rendell prevailed in his push to get \$90 million this year for the laptop computers and \$75 million for the pre-kindergarten programs.

"I think education is a big winner in this budget," Tomlinson said. "I think we've got to start spending our educational money more on students instead of on school districts."

Some Bucks members in the state House of Representatives were less impressed.

Rep. Scott A. Petri, R-178, said more money should be spent on basic education aid instead of increasing money for new programs, such as pre-kindergarten classes.

Some districts lack the space needed for such classes, Petri said.

"The question really is will our local school districts be able to use the money," Petri said.

Environmental groups on Monday hailed a tentative agreement that would avoid siphoning \$40 million in funding for parks, libraries, state museums and conservation programs to pay for cleaning up toxic waste sites.

Jan Jarrett, vice president of Harrisburg-based environmental watchdog PennFuture, said lawmakers will wait until this fall to figure out how to pay for the hazardous waste cleanup fund, which will be drained on Sept. 30.

"It lets us dodge a bullet," said Jarrett, who last week claimed that cutting \$40 million from the Keystone Fund would represent the largest ever decrease in conservation funding. "

Rep. Chris King, D-142, said he was satisfied with waiting.

"I certainly prefer this to raiding the Keystone Fund," King said of waiting. "I would be very hard pressed to support taking money away from my parks and libraries, and I look forward to finding a dedicated source of funding for the hazardous sites clean up fund."

King said he was still reviewing all the provisions, but was pleased with the overall budget.

"I am very happy that this is a no tax-increase budget with a very modest increase in spending over the last year," King said.

Tomlinson represents Bensalem, Bristol Township, Bristol, Middletown, Langhorne, Langhorne Manor, Lower Southampton, Penndel, Hulmeville, Northampton, Wrightstown, Ivyland and Warwick. King represents Hulmeville, Langhorne, Langhorne Manor, Penndel, all but two precincts in Lower Southampton and part of Middletown. Petri's district includes Northampton, Wrightstown and Ivyland and portions of Upper Makefield, Upper Southampton and Warwick. McIlhinney represents Falls, Lower Makefield, Morrisville, Tullytown, Newtown, Newtown Township, Upper Makefield, Yardley, 20 municipalities in

Central and Upper Bucks and two Montgomery County communities.

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