

School leaders share budget concerns with Sen. Tomczyk

BY BRIAN WILSON
NEWS EDITOR

State Sen. Cory Tomczyk came to Medford on Friday afternoon to hear what area residents had to say about budget priorities. The listening session was held at the Frances L. Simek Memorial Library.

Tomczyk, who took office in January replacing longtime Sen. Jerry Petrowski, said he has been learning the difference between setting a budget for his business and working on the state budget.

"Budgeting for businesses is a lot different than budgeting for government," he said.

The session was attended by Medford District Administrator Pat Sullivan and school finance director Audra Brooks who took the opportunity to have a wide-ranging talk with Sen. Tomczyk on topics relating to school and school funding. While coming at the issues from different perspectives, the discussion was lively and cordial with areas of agreement and disagreement.

Among the issues raised, Sullivan noted that Tomczyk's website makes reference to critical race theory (CRT) being taught in schools.

"Do you know of schools teaching CRT?" Sullivan said. He said he was unaware of any school district that used it in their curriculum. "I can assure them that Medford doesn't," he said.

Tomczyk said there are concerns that while it may not be being overtly taught, there are spots where it exists within school curriculums. He gave the example of Wausau. "There is a lot of CRT-type stuff around the Wausau area," he said. He also noted that "Reality is a part of perception." Noting that if parents believe it to be one way, the schools need to get the message out that it is not that way.

Sullivan emphasized that Medford schools aren't teaching CRT.

The discussion moved on to address vouchers. Legislative leadership has called for the budget to increase the voucher program which channels taxpayer dollars to private schools to cover tuition expenses. Tomczyk said he is a supporter of vouchers for giving additional parental choice in their student's education.

Sullivan disagreed on the benefit of putting public funds to private schools. "Private schools don't have the same rules," he said, noting they don't have the same licensing requirements, testing, don't have to take special needs children and don't have to pay for school buses.

Tomczyk asked if Sullivan saw the local private schools as competition.

"I don't think it is much of a competition," Sullivan said, noting that teachers from the private schools in the community routinely apply for open positions in the public school. He was quick to note that the public schools and private schools work cooperatively in many areas.

"We have a great working relationship with them," he said, noting his objection was on funding when the rules are so different.

Brooks said she looked at vouchers from the perspective of what they are doing to taxpayers and that the vouchers in effect create a tax increase for everyone in the district.

She explained that locally voucher schools receive about \$300,000 per year. The way the state accounts for this is to remove it from the state aid amount the public school receives. This leaves that sized hole in the school's finances which is then added to the local property tax levy.

Brooks said most people, including most legislators, don't realize how that works. She said that she becomes frustrated from having to charge taxpayers for that cost when their standards aren't the same and private schools don't have to deal with special education.

Tomczyk, who has served for many years as a member of the Mosinee school board, said he understood their concerns especially with the burden public schools have for special education students.

Tomczyk said that what motivates people is their opinion of what is best for a child. Tomczyk said he is not "anti-public school," but rather is pro-options for parents.

He said he doesn't think the Medford School District is going to be impacted by school choice or that it will make major impacts on northern rural communities. Sullivan disagreed saying parents have always had a choice to pay the tuition and send their children to private schools.

"I think they should play by the same rules and they should have to do the same things if they have taxpayer dollars," Sullivan said.

He gave the example of transportation, which the public school has to provide. The District currently spends about \$1.4 million for transportation, which is likely to go up to \$1.7 million in the next school budget.

The session concluded with a discussion of what schools can expect to see in the coming biennial budget. Two years ago, legislators had instructed districts



BRIAN WILSON/THE STAR NEWS

State Sen. Cory Tomczyk (left) and a member of his staff talked with Medford school district administrator Pat Sullivan and school finance director Audra Brooks during a listening session held in Medford on Friday afternoon.

to use the one-time federal ESSER grant dollars to fill gaps in their budgets rather than giving increases.

Brooks raised concern about the fiscal cliff that this has set up for districts around the state unless the state fills in the gap. "It is a really big concern of mine," Brooks said.

"You are going to get an increase," Tomczyk said, however, he said the increase will not be to the level the governor has proposed.

"You are not going to get what the governor said," he said, explaining that the governor just proposes a budget, but it is the legislature which writes the budget with the governor at the end being able to change things with the line item veto. Tomczyk explained that as the rookie in the Senate for the budget process he is not directly involved in the discussions on the exact amounts of what increases will be.

Brooks also noted that the district continues to be punished for being fiscally responsible in the 1990s when the state first froze the amounts schools can levy. She said the state average for spending per

pupil is \$11,450 but Medford is at \$10,041. She said if they could receive what the average was for the state it would make a big difference. "We are a responsible, conservative community and we are still to this day being hurt by this," she said.

Brooks also asked that the state look at adding flexibility to things such as mental health grants and other things to allow more uses.

"One time money doesn't support long-term anything," she said.

Tomczyk thanked Sullivan and Brooks for sharing their concerns at the listening session, noting that input was exactly why he was holding them so that he could hear concerns.

"I am a supporter of education," he said, noting that the children who are being educated now are the nurses and doctors who will be keeping him alive when he is in a nursing home later.

"They are going to be running your world when you are in a wheelchair and nursing home," Tomczyk said of the importance of making sure the next generation has a quality education.



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On Tuesday, students in the Holy Rosary School Student Council presented Stepping Stones and Taylored House with money from their Fat Tuesday Bake Sale. This service project was a school wide effort to help local community organizations. In addition to raising funds for the two organizations, they also purchased new sleds for use by students in the school.

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