

BUDGET BALANCING ACT

- County weighs needs for education, care — and coronavirus
- Demographic profile creates fiscal stresses

BY TIM CARRINGTON
For Foothills Forum

From the schools to the Sheriff's Office, calculators have been clicking out pluses and minuses, cutting here, adding there, finding the path to spending of \$26,614,176 in Fiscal Year 2021, a slight reduction from current levels, and matched to \$26,614,176 in expected revenues.

Now the new coronavirus, rapidly transmissible and in some cases lethal, has shaken every government organization — federal, state and local — forcing policymakers to reassess and prepare for the worst. County Administrator Garrey W. Curry, Jr., six days after presenting an intricately prepared budget, declared a Local State of Emergency, as businesses, county agencies, and families scrambled to reschedule, reprioritize, rethink and reinvent.

Email inboxes are overflowing with

messages from offices, restaurants, charities, and churches explaining their new norms. But as elsewhere, Rappahannock's corner of Planet Corona must build on the foundation of the county budget — the funds that flow in each year through taxes, federal and state support and various grants, and then flow back out to educate, protect, and advance a measure of sanity, public and private. Curry calls the plan presented March 11 "a very lean budget," and even with coronavirus in the mix, he thinks it will stay that way. "Significant increases in expenditure should be eligible for federal or state disaster cost share," he explains. "Our local declaration (of a State of Emergency) and tracking of increased expenditures, if any, will enable us to apply for federal or state disaster reimbursement."

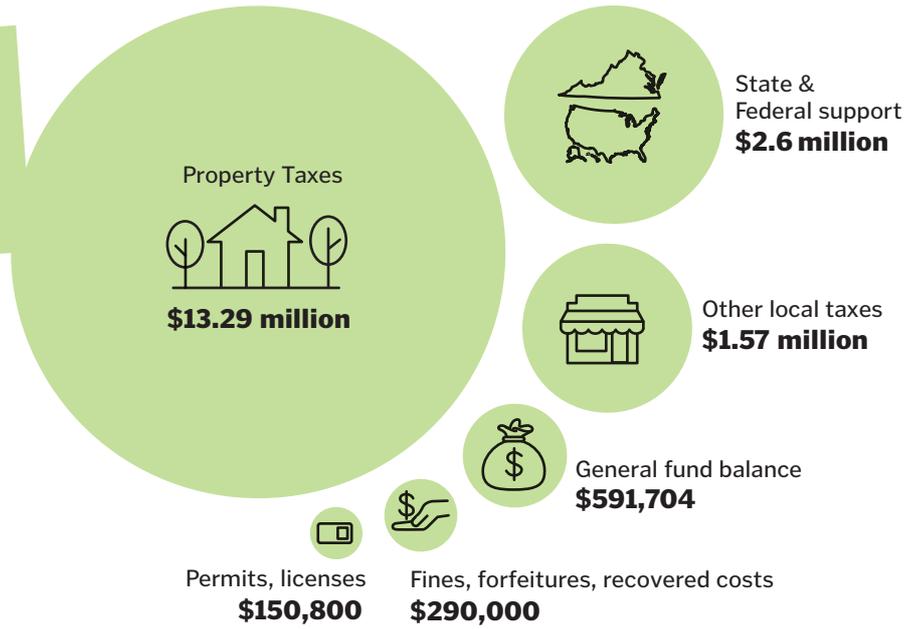
Like Tennessee Williams' famous character, Blanche DuBois, Rappahannock County has always depended on the kindness of strangers — mostly the Commonwealth of

Virginia and the federal government, but also foundations and other non-profit contributors. For example, sources outside the county already cover almost three-quarters of the Social Services budget, which is responsible for a mix of emergency services to people in need, including foster-care arrangements for children in deeply troubled, risky households. The schools in FY 2020 will spend about \$8.96 million of county funds, while the state, federal government and other special funds kick in an additional \$4.16 million. Special expenditures arising from the current health crisis may bump less urgent activities to the sidelines, or might benefit from emergency programs now being crafted by the federal and state governments.

Before the coronavirus, the state and federal government were poised to add up to \$2,614,360 to the overall budget on top of the hefty support provided the schools. But in an indication of the spending pressures faced by the

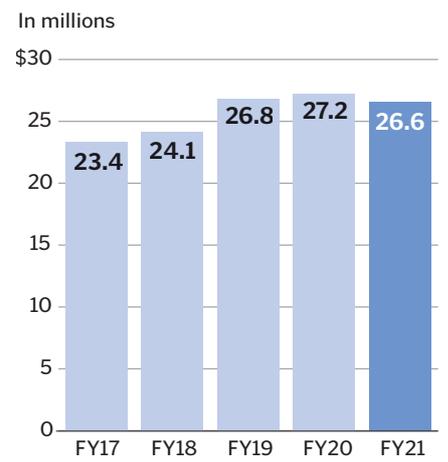
CRITICAL SOURCES OF REVENUE

The main sources of revenue are essentially the same as in the past. Property taxes remain the county's biggest source of revenue.



THE TREND

The budget proposal would trim spending after four years of increases.



*FY2017-2018 represent adopted budgets; FY2019-2020 are amended budgets; FY 2021 is the proposed budget

Graphics by LAURA STANTON

state and federal government — before coronavirus — the FY21 help would constitute a \$132,238 drop from the current fiscal year. Leaders in both Richmond and Washington are making available unprecedented levels of assistance to help the country prepare for and respond to the pandemic, but the crisis will add to government debt levels and spending pressures will return with greater intensity once the health crisis has passed.

Rappahannock citizens like a lean budget — which holds off increased taxes — but the current health crisis points up some of the difficulties facing a small county with an aging population, much open land, and low growth. And long after the corona crisis subsides, Rappahannock can expect spending pressures for the schools, fire and rescue teams, and social services.

Curry underscores another reality — the county budget, even with state and federal help — will not meet every need as the corona crisis unfolds. "I expect that non-governmental organizations will be absolutely critical in meeting the needs of our citizens," he says, noting that "local nonprofits can be much more efficient coordinating support to our citizens and businesses." →

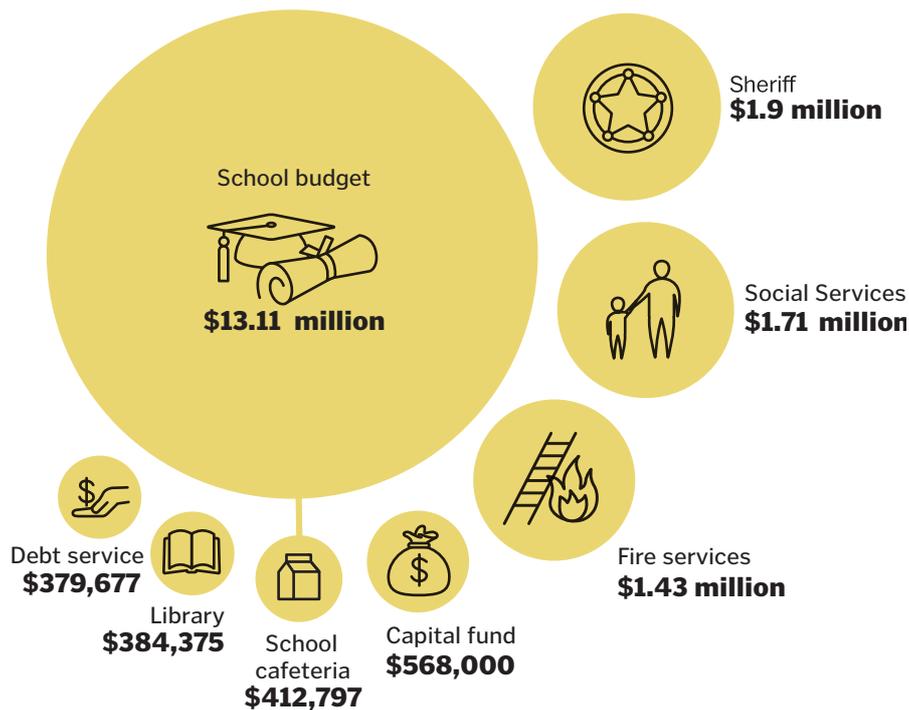


"Significant increases in expenditure [for coronavirus] should be eligible for federal or state disaster cost share."

County Administrator Garrey W. Curry, Jr.

SPENDING PRIORITIES

The largest recipients of spending are detailed below. The schools remain the county's biggest expense.



Aligning revenues and expenses

➔ Where does the money come from and where does it go? Dozens of line items exist on both sides of the balance sheet, but a glance at the largest revenue source and the largest expense suggests a useful simplification: Rappahannock County taxes land to educate kids. General property taxes account for \$13.3 million in the proposed budget, just over the \$13.1 million required to run the schools, which since 1995 have been the largest employer in the county.

In addition to the schools, a number of budgeted items are either non-negotiable or resistant to sizable budget cuts. Managing the Sheriff's Office, covering administrative costs of the county government and maintaining the Rappahannock Public Library would use \$4.4 million under the new budget, and few would argue for significant cutbacks in these allocations. Add in \$379,677 in interest payments on county-issued bonds, and the county shows about \$17.9 million, including the schools, or 67 percent of the overall budget, that most would consider immune from major reductions.

The budget presentation sets off a process of hearings and horse-trading, now complicated by corona. "It's the first public interaction on the overall budget," Curry says, adding that surprises, protests and new demands vector in from different corners. "Sometimes we're waiting for what comes out of the (Virginia) General Assembly," he says, "or there could be policy decisions by the Board of Supervisors" before the new budget year begins next October.

Facing into the coronavirus, federal and state emergency assistance is unclear, and so is Rappahannock's level of need. The current schedule of public hearings, running through the spring, will take place in an environment of partial information and guesswork.

If corona-related spending exceeds 1 percent of the adopted budget, the Code of Virginia will require the county to schedule a new round of public hearings.

Citizens are invited to push back at public hearings on any and all budget plans. Last year, the initial budget didn't meet the school board's request for salary increases plus funds for a new social worker in the high school. "There was a hue and cry to provide full funding, and the board decided to do it," Curry says.

But for all its complications, the process is a scaled-up version of a family sitting at a kitchen table balancing desires and necessities for the year ahead — with no easy solutions. How should a family weigh the benefits of a new washing machine versus tutoring for a math-challenged teenager? Similarly, how does the Board of Supervisors weigh the need to replace a shortfall in outside support for pre-school education, with the need

"We get workers that are fairly new, and they're short-term here. We've had a high turnover rate."

Director of Social Services
Jennifer Parker

Photographs
by LUKE
CHRISTOPHER



to staff up for an expanded population of often isolated elderly people, who are particularly vulnerable to the corona pandemic?

Revenue considerations present another set of tradeoffs. Land is the main source of tax revenue, but property taxes face limitations. The Shenandoah National Park owns 40,995 acres of Rappahannock County. Then there are 217 properties, equaling 31,027 acres that are set aside under conservation easements. Of the remaining privately owned land, much of it is taxed at less than market value because of land-use provisions that provide a break for land dedicated to agriculture, horticulture or forestry. Landowners count on land-use-related tax reductions, though owners of parcels too small for farming or hay-cutting pay taxes based on the full market value of their holdings. Because so many residents make use of land-use regulations, which benefit both farms and open landscapes, there have been no widely backed efforts to dismantle or shrink back the tax breaks.

Age matters

Age matters when it comes to finances. The hypothetical kitchen-table family, beyond meeting the next year's anticipated outlays, plans for the eventual retirement of middle-aged parents, future education for offspring, and medical and housing needs for grandparents. Rappahannock County does the same, but with an eccentric profile: the county is both smaller and older than neighboring counties, and the combination of higher land prices and limited employment opportunities continue to push younger citizens on a migration path out. Here are just some of the consequences the Rappahannock profile holds for present and future budgets:

➔ School populations are shrinking, which translates into thinner subsidies from the state.

➔ Fewer young adults mean fewer Fire and Rescue volunteers, ideally

BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING

Thursday, April 2, 10 a.m.

The first public hearing on the budget will now include other topics, including COVID-19 and other matters that may come before the Board of Supervisors.

Access: There *will not* be physical public access to this meeting, which will be held at the library.

How to comment:
EMAIL: Email to admin@rappahannockcountyva.gov before 10 a.m. on Thursday, April 2.

PHONE: Call County Administration at (540) 675-5330 before 9 a.m. on Thursday, April 2.

ZOOM Live Stream: Comments may be available via the Zoom Live Meeting. The link for this meeting is <https://zoom.us/j/854420400>

▶ **Watch the meeting:**
rappnews.com and on the Rappahannock News YouTube page

young and physically fit, and fewer young families to take on foster-care responsibilities.

➔ With one in four county residents 65 or older, there is more demand for services to mitigate isolation and address the panoply of elderly citizens' medical, logistical and emotional needs.

The aging trend isn't new: in 1980, 59 county residents had observed their 85th birthdays, according to the U.S. Census. By 2000, there were 87, and by 2010, the 85-and-up cohort had reached 130.

These trends don't dominate the budget discussion year to year, but Rappahannock demographics influence every long-term projection of expected revenues and spending over the next two decades. If the

See **BUDGET**, Page 14

BUDGET

From Page 13

demographic spiral of aging citizens and exiting young people continues, the county will face the tough choice of raising taxes for current residents, or embracing at least some pro-development policies that would bring in more tax-paying residents and businesses.

Currently, Rappahannock's population growth is flatter than that of Madison, Page, Warren, Fauquier or Culpeper counties. According to the U.S. Census, Rappahannock can expect the population to expand to 7,460 by 2040, up from 7,236 in 2020 — a trajectory far more modest than in the five neighboring counties. Low growth is part of Rappahannock's identity, and its passionate preference, but it translates to fewer households sharing the tax burden.

Teachers double up subjects

Nowhere are county demographics more in focus than at the schools, where the State of Virginia's funding formula whacks schools with smaller student populations. "It's financially worrisome right now," says Dr. Shannon L. Grimsley, whose business card reads: "Superintendent and Cheerleader in Chief." There is talk of pushing for changes in the way the state calculates support levels, but she concedes, "I doubt the formula is going to change very much."

Meanwhile, she is continually mining for targeted funding infusions from the state and other sources. Rappahannock is part of a coalition of 80-some rural school systems pushing the General Assembly in Richmond for teacher salary increases. Starting salaries for Rappahannock teachers with bachelor's degrees are the lowest among 10 central Virginia counties; the Rappahannock teachers are offered \$41,353, lower than the 10-county average of \$43,150. "It's inequitable and it's hurting kids," says Dr. Grimsley.

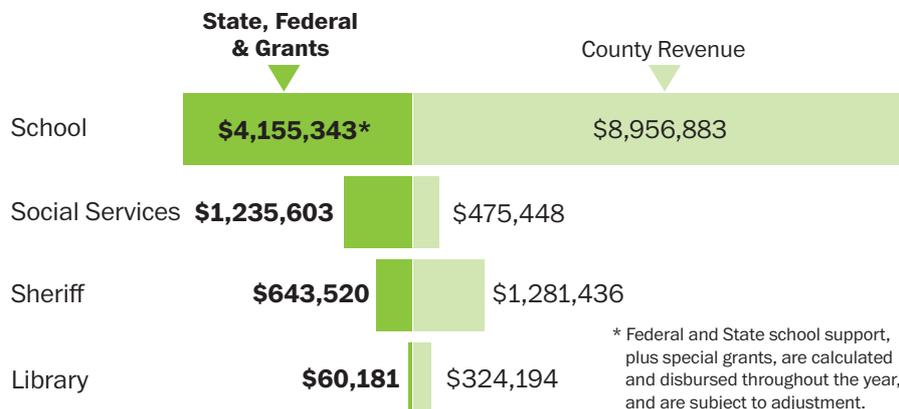
To avoid budget increases, the schools are pushing teachers to double up course loads. "Our Latin teacher now teaches Math (on top of the Latin)," says Dr. Grimsley, adding that "eight teachers have added endorsements qualifying them to teach other things. We ask a lot of our teachers."

Rappahannock County's connectivity shortfalls will challenge the learning prospects for students following the school closures ordered by the Virginia governor as part of the corona fight. While other students in the U.S. are linking to their teachers, along with learning materials and one another, remote learning options in Rappahannock are limited by spotty Internet connections — a frustration for teachers and families.

Education is deeply affected by the psychological well-being of the students, and here, worries are surfacing. A survey conducted by the Mental Health Association of Virginia, the oldest advocate for mental health in the state, found that 45 percent of student responders reported struggling with



RAPP BUDGET DEPENDS ON HELP FROM OUTSIDE



WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?



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anxiety in the last 12 months, while 35 percent said they had experienced depression. The successful push last year to add a social worker position in the high school is making a difference," says Dr. Grimsley, "but what I found out is that I need two or three more."

Too young to understand the disruption, the students with the most at stake are the youngest — the pre-kindergartners. A change in eligibility rules effectively cut the county's preschool off from federal Head Start funds two years ago. Managers of the preschool program were quick to improvise a series of survival tactics, with support from the school and outside funders. The budget plan includes support for continuing the program, but its future depends on tapping a mix of other funding streams, with critical decisions from outside sources coming this fall.

Fighting fires for pay

Rappahannock's seven firehouses have counted on hundreds of faithful volunteers over the years to respond to calls when a barn catches on fire or an elderly citizen falls or suffers a heart attack. Now the volunteers themselves are aging, moving to

retirement communities or just scaling back their local obligations. And as the demographics would suggest, younger volunteers aren't around to step up, at least not in the numbers required to keep the Fire and Rescue companies operating as an all-volunteer force.

The result is that Rappahannock will follow other counties in building a staff that blends paid workers with volunteers. Under the proposed FY21 budget, Rappahannock County would cover the operational budget of the seven Fire and Rescue companies and the volunteer Fire and Rescue Association. Meanwhile, anticipating the recruitment of paid Emergency Medical Services staff alongside the volunteers, the budget plan suggests an increase of two cents per \$100 in the fire services levy that is applied to real estate. The changes would enlarge the Fire Services Fund to \$1,427,950 from \$1,110,599 this year with \$381,937 of that going onto a contingency fund to support the transition to partial paid EMS staff.

In many parts of the country, corona already is forcing active firefighters into quarantine because they have been exposed to those who are confirmed to be infected. If the same pattern plays out in the county, there could be more pressures on critical fire and rescue companies.

Rappahannock isn't alone in finding it can't depend entirely on volunteers for fire and rescue. Brian Lichty, director of Emergency Services in Clarke County, just east of Winchester and about twice the size of Rappahannock, has managed a blended force for several years. The volunteer force shrank from 90 four years ago to about 75 today, so a dozen full-time employees now rotate across three shifts. "It's a nationwide trend," Lichty says. "This is what happens in smaller districts."

Paging social workers

Just down the road from the globally renowned Inn at Little Washington is a modest building housing the Department of Social Services. This

arm of county government works on behalf of residents facing urgent needs related to poverty, addiction, isolation and mental illness. About 75 percent of the department's \$1,711,051 proposed budget for the coming year is expected to come from the federal and state government.

Beneath the rolling beauty and apparent affluence of the county is a topography of need. Thirty-one percent of babies arrive in single-parent households. Nine percent of the population, and 14 percent of the children, live below the poverty-line, defined by the federal government as \$26,200 per year for a family of four. An opioid crisis in the region has brought havoc to families and communities, and although opioid overdoses are declining, substance abuse patterns remain widespread, with Rappahannock students using alcohol and marijuana at earlier ages than in surrounding counties.

The toughest social work involves the decisions to separate children from households determined to be dangerously neglectful or otherwise risky. Foster-care arrangements are arduous at best, but in a county with fewer young adults, placements crop up as far afield as Richmond, adding to costs for the county, and to the trauma experienced by the children involved. Foster-care legal costs pushed up to \$144,000 in 2019, but have tailed off as the county tries to work with families to improve the environment for children, rather than resort to separation and foster-care.

UP NEXT

Focus on Schools: The biggest budget category, and the county's biggest employer. Under pressure from the demographics of an older population and a smaller student body, resulting in a squeeze on state funding.

The biggest challenge is staffing the operation. Of 12 full-time staff at the Department of Social Services, one lives in Rappahannock County. The rest commute, some from significant distances. "Because we're rural, we're a training ground," says Jennifer Parker, director of Social Services. "We get workers that are fairly new, and they're short-term here. We've had a high turnover rate." Rappahannock's real estate profile is rich in farmland and properties for retirees and weekenders, but thin in rentals and purchases suitable to the income of a young, newly employed social worker. With higher pay and more housing prospects elsewhere, the Department of Social Services must manage a relentless turnover and recruitment cycle — inherently disruptive in social-work relationships, where the trust and continuity are crucial.

A particular concern is maintaining links to seniors living alone. Parker says, "we need to check in," but the one social worker assigned to this segment of the community has a caseload of 40 elderly citizens. He "is loved and is dedicated," she adds, "but we need to help him." The FY21 budget is tight, and the help might not come until the year after. But when that budget cycle arrives, there will be many other demands competing for the same funds.

BUDGET **BALANCING** ACT

Learning in Lockdown

Rappahannock schools adjust and adapt as COVID-19 crisis sinks in

BY TIM CARRINGTON
For Foothills Forum

Managing a school is as challenging as managing growing up itself. Crises, scares and tragedies mix with triumphs, jokes and adolescent passions, while adults regulate the chaos and pay the bills.

The game gets redefined from one week to the next, and now with the COVID-19 lockdown, it's school-without-walls, buses in hibernation, food bags for hungry youngsters and Internet hotspots drawing in cars with screens glowing inside.

A month after presenting a budget that economizes slightly from the previous year, Rappahannock County Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley scans an upended landscape. The fundamental financial problem is that the revenues that support the schools have been thrown into a state of suspended instability.

"With the locality providing 80 percent of the funding — that's usually the stable source," says Grimsley. "Now we're looking at the reverse, where the locality is under strain, and that will translate into everyone making tough decisions."

The most wrenching decisions lie ahead.

"This revenue effect is going to be heavier on next year's budget than this year's," says School Board Chairman Wes Mills.

In mapping the next fiscal year, the schools tightened spending plans, postponing maintenance projects and encouraging current teachers to take on new areas of instruction. The savings resulted in a proposed budget of \$13.11 million, \$95,000 less than the current fiscal year, which ends June 30.

But that was before the pandemic and lockdown. Now county supervisors have warned that they will need the schools to whack another \$75,000 from the new budget.

Revenues under assault

The reason is blindingly simple: The taxes the county depends upon are under assault. Sales taxes and meals and lodging levies — recently seen to be marching toward \$1 million a year — have dried up as businesses, innkeepers, pubs and restaurants go into lockdown.

Some businesses will limp through the crisis, but others will be closed for good, depending on how the pandemic plays out. Real estate taxes appear stable, since assessed property values aren't changing. But county officials are



BY HOLLY JENKINS

RCPS Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley, right, helping hand out laptops to students so they can study while classrooms are closed. "Shannon is very good at making sure we have ultimate flexibility with staff and innovative ideas about how to retool whole programs," says School Board Chairman Wes Mills.

worried that residents are straining to keep up with mortgages and other loan payments, and that some property taxes will slide into delinquent status. That means less money for the county, and its biggest single program — the schools — to work with.

"Every element of revenue is inherently unstable," says Supervisor Keir Whitson (Hampton District).

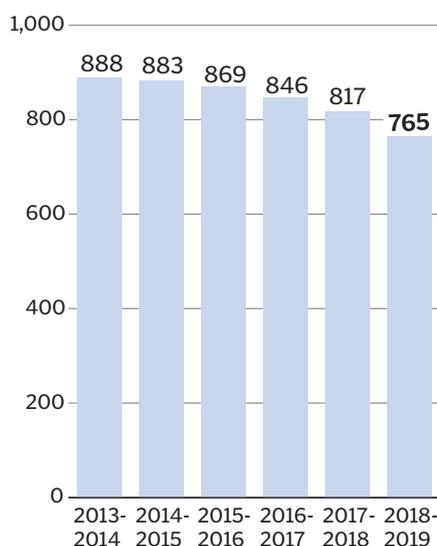
Already slicing into the planned budget, county officials expect a never-ending adjustment process as they navigate an ocean of unknowns. How long before businesses return to limited operations or, eventually, business-as-usual? How much tangible relief will reach Rappahannock County from the \$2 trillion-plus federal rescue package? Will Rappahannock's diligent embrace of household isolation and social distancing bring the hoped-for reward of infection rates that are modest and manageable? The unanswered questions keep stacking up, and all of them have consequences for what Rappahannock County brings in, and what it spends.

Good news from Richmond

Welcome news has come from Richmond, where the Virginia Assembly approved a plan to add \$231,790 to the state support for Rappahannock schools. Most of these

DROPPING ENROLLMENT

Enrollment in Rappahannock's public schools has dropped almost 14 percent from 2013-2014.



funds will finance work on buildings and facilities. Separately, the preschool program — set back two years ago by an unanticipated ejection from the federal Head Start program — is in line for a critical boost of \$52,293 from the Virginia Preschool Initiative.

County officials say the added state support partly reflects efforts by a rural schools coalition to sensitize Virginia lawmakers to the challenges facing rural schools like those in

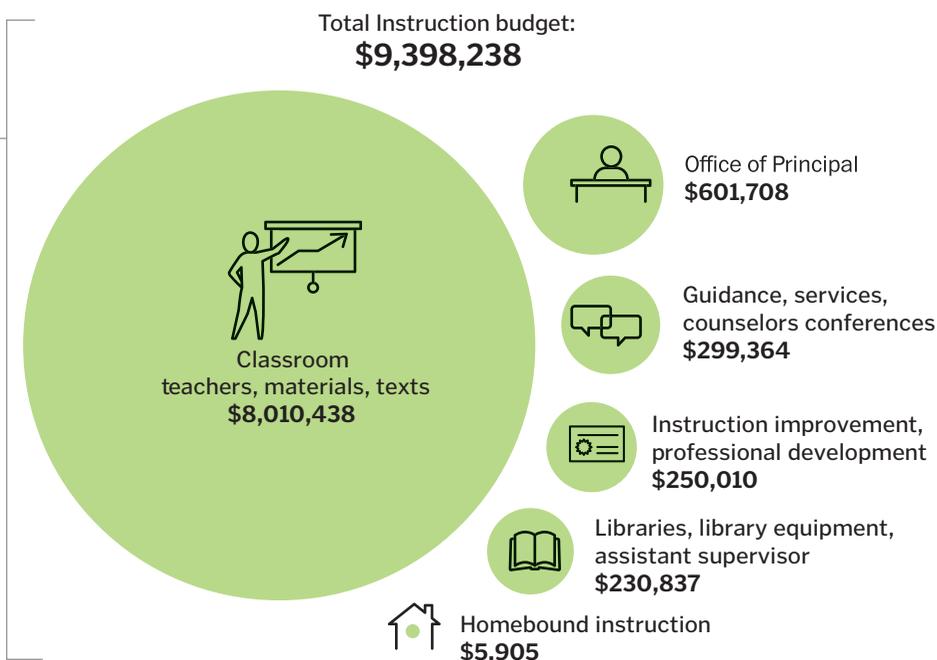
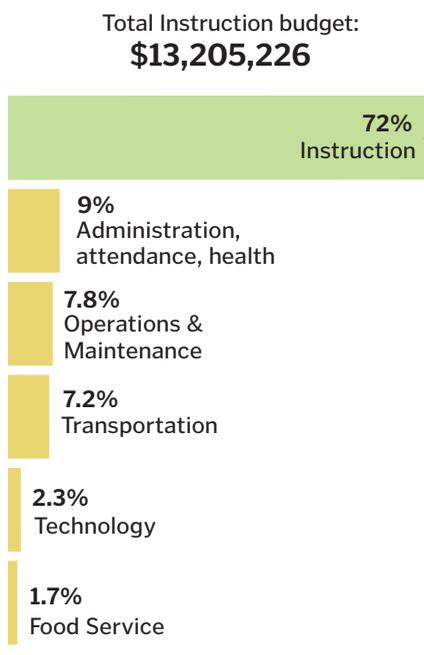
Rappahannock. "It looks like the rural school message got through," says Whitson. Gov. Ralph Northam's push to strengthen public education statewide is also important, all the more so as the COVID-19 pressures deepen.

But the good news from Richmond was partly offset by bad news from Washington: Federal support for the schools is dropping, with an expected reduction of \$61,398 from the levels projected in the county budget plan presented March 11. Moreover, in the current environment of unending flux, even the state's recent commitments can't fully be treated as money in the bank. The governor has proposed that new spending be frozen until the state can gain an accurate reading of how much the pandemic and lockdown will damage state revenues. This could mean that as much as \$72,000 expected by the county schools in the summer won't show up till the end of the year, and maybe not then. County officials note, with worry, a new phrase in the state lexicon — "unallotment," meaning a fiscal commitment that may be stranded in limbo for a while or shelved altogether.

Reinventing school

Amid the uncertainty, the school district is determined to deliver — differently — on the various commitments made to the 765

SCHOOL BUDGET SPENDING



Graphics by LAURA STANTON

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→ students and their families. Here are some key elements of the local education realm under COVID-19:

→ To assist learning in lockdown, the schools distributed on April 15 some 400 devices — laptops and iPads — that were loaded with content for continued study. Technology funds within the budget were reallocated to cover the costs.

→ With support from a variety of local businesses, churches and other county organizations, an archipelago

Like other Rappahannock-based students whose colleges and universities are closed, Drake Lynn, a 2018 graduate of Rappahannock County High School, uses the RCPS Hotspot Hub at the county library for his coursework at Virginia Tech. “Most professors use Powerpoint in the Zoom classes, and I don’t have enough bandwidth at home in Castleton with HughesNet.”



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

of Wi-Fi hotspots opened up to accommodate students with patchy broadband connections at home. → With the school cafeterias closed, Amanda Butler, the school nutrition director, organized distribution of more than 1,000 meals to families in the county.

→ The high school social worker, Kathy Sickler, created a hotline for students suffering from anxiety, depression and isolation. And teachers are contacting students directly.

“It’s remarkable how much we’ve been able to reinvent the educational model in two weeks,” says Grimsley. Still there are worries. Grimsley warns that the disruption, and adjustment to lockdown learning at a distance, along with strain and even trauma, at home, could result in “academic slide,” with students needing to address the learning deficits when normal academic schedules resume.

Some aspects of the lockdown save money for the schools. Stationary buses don’t burn fuel, and mostly empty buildings don’t run up electricity bills. If necessary, the schools can push the replacement of a 15-year-old bus into a year down the road, saving about \$80,000.

But savings brought about by sliding necessary expenditures into the future mainly relocate a spending crunch to a different spot on the timeline. And

UP NEXT

The cost of keeping order:

Challenges facing the Sheriff’s Department and county fire and rescue companies during an uncertain budget environment.

ONLINE

Read part one of this series at rappnews.com/balancingact

county officials worry that tax receipts could be under greater pressure next year. In addition, both federal and state governments will be spending massively to respond to the pandemic and lockdown. As a result, policymakers in Richmond and Washington will be less expansive as they operate under the shadow of debt mountains left by the current health crisis.

What the school system will fight to protect is planned increases in teacher pay. Statewide figures show that Rappahannock teachers’ starting salaries lag those for nine other central Virginia counties, though the benefits may reduce the gap. In the current environment, Grimsley concedes, pressures may force the school district to stretch out or postpone the introduction of the planned pay increases.

The district is determined to support Sickler’s social worker position it created at the start of this academic year. A recent survey conducted before the health crisis found that Rappahannock students reported comparatively high levels of anxiety and depression, and early uses of alcohol and marijuana. The new budget calls for a behavior intervention specialist to ease the heavy demands on the social worker.

Challenging backdrop

The scramble to improvise local responses to the global health crisis is taking place against a backdrop of long-term trends that concern planners and policymakers. The big trend affecting the district and its budget is the long-term shift in demographics:

Rappahannock County is smaller and, increasingly, older than neighboring counties. With fewer young families, and one in four residents 65 or older, the school population has shrunk to 765 from 888 seven years ago. Under the funding calculations used by the state of Virginia, the basic set of subsidies declines as the student body gets smaller.

Says School Board Vice Chairman Larry Grove: “The formula for funding is totally against us.”

Meanwhile Chairman Mills points out that what doesn’t decline is the paperwork demand associated with state regulation of schools. He says that in two decades of involvement with the county schools, “the student population has shrunk, but the budget has doubled because our requirements have doubled. We do more and more testing, reporting, tracking — not that this is good or bad — but the requirements change the financial model.”

Crash course in creativity

No one has lab-tested a fix to the cluster of challenges facing the Rappahannock County Public Schools, and other rural schools like it. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t innovations that address the budgetary and educational perils on the horizon. “The word that pops up is creativity,” says Whitson. “How can we be creative in an environment where we have steadily declining enrollment, shifting demographics and fiscal pressure?”

He and others credit Grimsley with a capacity for nimble adjustment to changing realities. One instinct that can pay dividends over time is her tireless search for financial support outside the usual funding streams. A recent example: aware of families facing severe strains as lockdown conditions combined with unemployment and insecurity, she worked with the Department of Social Services to secure a grant from the Northern Piedmont Community Foundation to support child care arrangements in these vulnerable homes.

“It’s vital to look at local, regional and state agencies to see what kind of public and private funding is available,” says Grimsley. In 2017, the schools obtained funding from the PATH Foundation for a Commit to Be Fit (C2BF) program that offers free fitness classes to promote healthier lifestyles for students, staff and county residents. Participation has grown and so far, PATH funds have added up to \$1.28 million.

When the next academic year starts, students can participate in the high school’s Agriculture Academy program. A newly recruited teacher and coordinator met qualifications to reopen a local chapter of Future Farmers of America, and to teach some classes in veterinary technician jobs. A similar track for health-care emphasizes jobs such as home health aide work that would be available to high school graduates capable of completing job-specific training.

“Shannon is very good at making sure we have ultimate flexibility with staff and innovative ideas about how to retool whole programs,” says Mills. And with the COVID-19 crisis, “we’re all learning as we go along.”