

School Board will hold another public hearing on April 20

SCHOOL BOARD: FROM 1

\$11.93 per \$1,000 valuation, but Smith, who joined the meeting by phone, said that max rate was set before the Legislature had completed its work on education funding for next year.

He said the Legislature's actions, along with a decision to lower the district's cash-reserve levy tax-asking from \$1.4 million to \$1 million, means the district may lower its levy rate to \$12.31084 per \$1,000 valuation. That still is an increase of 3.19 percent, and with valuations across the district included, the district's tax-asking will go up by almost 11.74 percent.

During his presentation, Smith said that in many ways schools' proverbial hands are tied to a formula put forth by the state and that districts really only have a say in two parts of the overall levy — the cash reserve fund and the management fund.

The cash reserve fund helps cover what Smith and board members call the district's special education deficit, which rose to more than \$800,000 this year, while the management fund has faced increasing pressure because of soaring property insurance premiums.

"We are required by law to meet those students' needs," Board President Jay Matthews said. "We don't have an option, but we have to do it. But the state isn't backfilling in completely to what we have to provide by law. So that extra \$800,000 has to come out of cash reserve, which is a property tax."

Smith said that while the state does provide additional funding for special-education students, they have not been adjusted in years.

"But again, it comes to the fact that an IEP [Individual Education Plan] is a legally binding document," Smith added, "and we are required to meet those needs."

And while the 10 or so residents who turned out for the hearing Monday seemed to appreciate the fact that the max-levy appears to have been lowered by almost 93 cents, they said even the new proposed levy presents a challenge.

Under the max-levy proposal, a residential property valued at \$100,000 for the 2025-26 fiscal year, will pay \$566 in school property taxes this year and if that property's value

increased to \$110,000 for next year's tax purposes, would pay \$648 in 2026-27, a jump of 14.49 percent.

A commercial property, meanwhile, will pay \$2,461 this year in school taxes and if that property's valued increased by 10 percent to \$330,000, that tax bill would go to \$3,027, an increase of 23 percent.

Smith presented that same \$100,000-to-\$110,000 residence and \$300,000-to-\$330,000 commercial property worksheet that showed the residence would pay \$603 in 2026-27, an increase of 6.54 percent while the commercial property would pay \$2,816, a jump of 14.43 percent.

Anna Havlik, a New Hampton resident who owns Muscari, a downtown coffee shop, said the district was heading in the right direction, but added the tax increase would be challenging for small businesses like hers.

"I'm not the only one looking at the commercial, either," she said, "but I'm not TriMark, I'm not Precision. I don't have those particular funds for 14.43 percent. I know it's better than 23 percent, but it's still a scary increase."

Other residents expressed concerns about what will happen to the tax rate if New Hampton embarks on a building proposal and asked Smith if the district was looking at cutting expenditures instead of raising revenues.

Board member Ryan Shawver emphasized the School Board still hasn't come up with a plan to address deficiencies of the district's buildings in a recent facility studies report, and Smith said that the district, as it has done in the past, will keep looking for savings where it can.

Smith and board members emphasized to residents that if they have questions, they need to reach out.

"We want to answer your questions, we want you to know we're doing our best to look out for your tax dollars," Matthews said. "School finance is complicated, so if you have concerns, talk to us."

And Matthews pointed out that residents — both those who showed up on Monday and those who didn't — will have one more chance to speak out before the board finalizes the 2026-27 budget and tax levy during its April 20 board meeting that will include another public hearing.



Bob Fenske/Tribune

Chickasaw County EMS remembers a beloved EMT



The late Brock Schmidt's family, friends, Chickasaw County EMS co-workers and other rescue personnel (above) pose for a picture Saturday morning during a ceremony in which Father Christopher Podhajsky (left) blesses a memorial bench that will be placed at the ambulance station in New Hampton. Schmidt passed away on March 22, 2025, while working a shift for the county-owned ambulance service.

It's been quite the journey for New Hampton swordsmith

GAGE: FROM 1

Go back to 2020, when COVID hit. Gage was a college student and he admits back then, he was — as he put it — "done" with school.

"It was like there's no point in doing this," he said. "I felt like I was wasting my time."

So he moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where his buddy, a fellow bodybuilder named Colton Arias lived and owned his own company.

"We're just going to become pro bodybuilders and work in a shop, and have some fun," Gage said with a laugh. "I was 20, you know, so why not?"

He started "stabilizing wood" in his apartment and he was making good money, too, although he laughed when recalling those early days. "I don't know how smart that, considering I'm not sure the apartment complex knew what I was doing. I mean I'm doing this MacGyver stuff in my apartment."

One day, his buddy asked him if he wanted to make a knife, and a career was born, although it got off to an auspicious start to say the least.

"Yeah, and I got injured in the process," he said with a laugh, "burning my whole hand. It was kind of gruesome, but I lived."

But what Gage really wanted to be was a swordsmith, even though Arias kept telling him "swords don't sell."

Slowly but surely he built it into a business even though he concedes he was "faking it until I make it" at the start. After a fire consumed his apartment — not because of the "MacGyver stuff" just to be clear, and after his older brother, Mitch, moved home after suffering a stroke, Gage returned to Iowa.

"A lot of stuff was happening," he said, "and I just felt like I needed to come home."

He opened his own shop. Thanks to the help from parents and businesses in the



Bob Fenske/Tribune

As he takes a break in the shop that houses the business, Nordland Forge, Carver Gage talks about the journey he has taken to become a swordsmith.

community, it was completed in just a few weeks, and over the past few years, he has taken to social media to, put it simply, get his name out there.

Nordland Forge has more than 360,000 followers on TikTok and Gage's videos has generated — we kid you not — more than 6.7 million likes, and his business is growing. He recently completed a sword for

Blizzard Entertainment that will be given away by the gaming company as part of a promotion.

Much of his work today involved creating swords for couples who are about to say "I do."

"A lot of people are getting away from rings," he said, "and so they have the swords as part of their weddings and then put them up on the wall as a memory of that day. It's a cool alternative."

But he takes care to learn the history of the swords and to decorate them with everything from jewels to ornate carvings.

"I didn't like American history all that much," he said, "because it was so boring. ... I like medieval stuff, I like ancient stuff. I like it when I'm transported to a time where I was a wanderer. When I do swords, the two big things I want is for them to be as historically accurate as possible and to give them a sense of art."

But the "wanderer" wants more.

He's working on a number of custom orders these days, but the goal is to strike out on his own, if you will, create his own sword and sell them at renaissance festivals and the like.

During the interview, he talked at length about the parts of his swords and how they come to life through the process. And while much of the technical part went over the reporter's head, one thing — his passion for his business — did not.

"I want to make money, don't get me wrong," he said, "but it's more than that. I want to keep learning and I want to come up with unique pieces that no one else does. To do that, I have to keep working obviously to pay the bills, but I also don't want to be satisfied. I always want to come up with something better, something unique, something that blows your mind."

Briefs

Swiss steak church fundraiser set for Sunday in North Washington

Immaculate Conception Church in North Washington will hold its annual Swiss steak dinner this Sunday, and it's a drive-through only event.

Serving from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., the meal will feature Swiss steak, potatoes and gravy, corn, coleslaw and a slice of pie. Advance tickets — purchased before the day of the meal — are \$16, with same-day tickets at \$17 per meal.

Tickets are available from any parishioner, from the parish office or the day of the dinner. Look for signs the day of the meal directing cars to the food pick-up area.

Proceeds from the meal will go toward church maintenance and raffle tickets for \$1 each will also be available.

Charles City farmers market to hold vendors meeting

A pre-season vendors meeting for the 2026 Charles City Farmers Market will be held at 5:30 p.m. this coming Monday at the Community Development Office at 401 North Main St. in Charles City.

Vendors do not have to attend in order to be a vendor at the Market, but information and applications for the 2026 season will be presented, and the group will vote on vendor rules, fees, dates and times, as well as set Customer Appreciation Week.

For more information, call (641) 228-2335 or email info@charlescitychamber.com.

INCLUSIVE EASTER EGG HUNT
 Saturday, April 4th
 11am-1pm
FREE EVENT
 Kindness Square Inclusive Park, New Hampton
 (across from Hospital)
 This event designed with special needs children in mind for participants up to 12th grade
 Variety of egg hunts, including sensory, adapted, and wheelchair-accessible Egg Hunts
 For more information, contact Harvest Church 641-394-4380

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 Shop Local!

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 LIMITED TIME REMAINING
dean jewelers
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