

# The Baker County Press

## School groups descend on legislators protesting \$\$ cuts

Written by Joel Addington

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Senator Dean and Representative Adkins

Local teachers, parents and school administrators turned out in force when state Senator Charlie Dean and state Representative Janet Adkins arrived for a delegation hearing the morning of February 25.

Many in the crowd, which was standing room only and overflowed out the doors of the Baker County Commission chambers on 3rd Street, delivered a similar plea: public schools cannot take anymore funding cuts.

The Florida Constitution requires the legislature to provide “adequate” funding for public education.

“Most of the people in this room don’t feel we’re going to get adequate funding,” said Sandi Harvey, a middle school teacher and president of the Baker County Education Association, the local teacher union.

Revenues to the Baker County school district dropped by \$1.46 million, or 5.5 percent, which equals about \$390 less per student, during the last year and a half, she noted.

Ms. Harvey asked for relief from both unfunded mandates like physical education and underfunded mandates like class-size reduction and other costs for buses, books and virtual schools.

Amanda Williams, the mother of a 6-year-old student, criticized the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, saying it focused too much on reading.

“It leaves math behind,” she said, adding that more funding should be available for math tutoring.

The Florida Legislature reduced education funding last year and again this year during the special session to deal with a \$2 billion-plus overall budget shortfall.

According to figures from the Florida Education Association, the statewide teacher union, education funding has dropped 6.1 percent since the 2007-08 budget and the state’s share of the cost for public schools is down to 48 percent, the lowest it’s ever been.

Another parent, Gary Stephens, said he’s heard talk of cutting education by as much as 15 percent, which he fears would mean teacher layoffs.

“I don’t want my son in a class with 30 or 40 kids — warehousing my son,” he said.

Mr. Stephens urged Ms. Adkins and Mr. Dean to eliminate more than a billion dollars in tax exemptions that could otherwise pay for education.

“You tell us citizens what we need to do to support you and we’ll get behind you,” he pledged.

Although most in attendance were from the education community, other local officials also addressed the legislators.

Health Department Director Kerry Dunlavey urged them to be mindful of how Medicaid reforms will affect rural

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health departments like Baker County's.

"We saw over half the population for primary care last year," she said. "We need to be very careful on how we proceed with Medicaid reform."

County Manager Joe Cone submitted a list of legislative priorities from the Baker County Commission, which included opposition to privatizing Northeast Florida State Hospital and ensuring funds would be available to offset the county's roughly \$762,000 loss from Amendment 1 property tax reforms.

Mr. Cone said the county is set to get about \$312,000 already, but \$450,000 remains unfunded.

"That's very important," he said.

Another attendee, Jimmy Gray, said holding a meeting in the middle of the day made it difficult for many to show up. "Eleven o'clock is a difficult time to get off work, especially in this economy," he said.

After listening and taking notes for most the hearing, the state legislators made some closing statements.

"This is American democracy at its best," professed Sen. Dean.

In response to the pleas for no more cuts to education, Rep. Adkins told the audience about her two children, both of whom attend public schools in Nassau County.

"I take that with me ... I'm passionate about public education," declared the former Nassau County School Board member.