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ONLY IN NEWSDAY LI'S AVERAGE SCHOOL TAX HIKE: 1.9%

Ninth straight
year the average
is below 3%

Average in Nassau
is 1.79%, and
Suffolk is 2.04%

A3 | DATA AT NEWSDAY.COM

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SCHOOL TAX HIKES UNDER 2%

LI's 124 districts to seek combined \$9.43B increases

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
AND MICHAEL R. EBERT

john.hildebrand@newsday.com,
michael.ebert@newsday.com

Long Island's 124 school districts will boost property taxes next year by an average of just under 2%, to a combined total of \$9.43 billion, state figures show.

Preliminary figures from the state comptroller's office indicate that Islandwide tax collections known as levies will grow by \$175 million, or 1.90%, during the 2022-23 school year. District tax levies in Nassau County will rise an average 1.76%; Suffolk County's, an average 2.04%.

The upcoming school fiscal year, which starts July 1, will be the ninth in a row during which average tax hikes will be held under 3%. Thirteen districts including Bethpage, Mineola, Brentwood and South Huntington are freezing next year's levies at current levels, according to the comptroller's numbers.

Not all tax estimates are running low, however.

The tiny New Suffolk district in Southold expects to seek a voter override of its state-assigned tax cap in order to raise taxation 6.3%. South Country's school district in southern Brookhaven Town projects a 7.76% tax increase, and officials there say their proposal does not require a cap override, due to exemptions in state law.

Voting on proposed school budgets and board candidates is scheduled this year for May 17 in districts across the state.

School taxes are a key economic factor in the Nassau-Suffolk region, where they account for more than 60% of homeowners' tax bills.

Aid infusion

One contributor to mostly modest tax growth is a record-breaking infusion of state and federal financial aid to schools. Since 2020, for example, schools on the Island have gained more than \$850 million in federal pandemic relief money, some of



The vast majority of LI school districts aren't planning to seek an override of the state's tax-hike cap.

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which they can continue spending through 2023-24.

The cash windfall has prompted debate between education leaders and taxpayer advocates over the question of whether districts could move even further in curbing taxes. School representatives contend they must maintain a balance.

"Schools are very carefully and cautiously utilizing this extra aid so as not to create a fiscal cliff when the funding dissipates in two years," said Lorraine Deller, executive director of the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association.

Kyle Strober, a regional business leader, views the situation differently.

"Considering the economy's trying to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and gas prices are at historic highs, it's astonishing that school districts continue to raise taxes after record amounts of federal aid and state aid have been given to Long Island school districts," Strober said.

Strober is executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, the region's lar-

CHART OF THE TAX PLANS, BY DISTRICT A19

gest group of commercial real-estate developers.

In South Country, which enrolls about 4,200 students, officials recently acknowledged that the state plans to cut its aid payment for school renovations from about \$9.3 million this year to \$3.7 million next year, leaving a large revenue hole to fill. As a result, South Country has tentatively decided to boost next year's tax levy by 7.76%.

The district's superintendent, Joseph Giani, told board trustees at a recent meeting that causes of the financing gap can be traced back to decisions made more than a decade ago, when South Country borrowed more than \$100 million to cover costs of school remodeling. Such loans can be paid off over 20 years, but the state provides reimbursement for only 15 years — a scheduling mismatch that has produced the latest crisis.

The explanation from Giani, who plans to retire soon, drew rebukes from some board mem-

bers and local residents. Those critics said the district should have planned its long-range funding more carefully.

"My thought is to vote 'no,'" said Dan Polner, a longtime Bellport resident who works as an economic development specialist at Stony Brook University. "Let them go on an austerity budget that they should have been on 15 years ago."

Strict cap law

Another factor in keeping tax hikes low is the state's strict cap law, which took effect in 2012-13. The statute sets a maximum baseline increase each year of 2% or the inflation rate, whichever is lower. This year's baseline is 2%, with inflation running well over that figure.

Under law, districts seeking bigger tax hikes than caps allow must win approval from at least 60% of voters. For 2022-23, the only district announcing it probably will seek a cap override is New Suffolk. The district already obtained voter overrides in 2012 and 2017.

School leaders there calculate they will lose at least two elementary school students next year who now pay tuition,

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Long Island's 124 school districts** project \$9.43 billion in combined property taxation for 2022-23, up 1.9% on average from the current year.
- **South Country's school district** tentatively calls for a 7.76% tax hike, the largest in the region.
- **New Suffolk** says it probably will seek to override the state's tax cap, the only district to announce such plans.

because they live outside the district. That would leave the district with seven students in its elementary school. As a result, the district says that next year's tax levy will probably have to be raised 6.3% to make up for the lost revenue.

Tony Dill, the district's board president, said a levy hike this size would require New Suffolk to override its state-assigned tax cap. Dill adds that the problems of managing a district so small are difficult to explain in a world where most school systems are far larger.

"Here, it's a whole different ballgame," Dill said.

Caps on individual districts can run either higher or lower than the baseline, depending on local circumstances. The limit can be higher, for example, if local residents vote "yes" for a school construction bond issue, because costs of paying off bond borrowing are exempt from caps. South Country officials say their district falls into this category and does not need a cap override.

Tax-levy figures are collected annually by the state comptroller's office, under a state law that requires districts to disclose such data by March 1 of each year. The requirement serves as an "early alert" system that provides district residents with advance notice of changes in taxations.

For its analysis, Newsday obtained data from the comptroller's office for 121 districts. Newsday contacted three additional districts on its own to get figures not reported by the March 1 deadline.