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Kamenetz's final Baltimore County budget has planning money for high schools; holds line on tax rates

Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz unveiled a \$3.3 billion budget plan Thursday that holds the line on county tax rates and puts a controversial decision on new high school construction in the hands of the school board.

Parents have been clamoring for replacement schools for Dulaney High in Timonium, **Towson High** and Lansdowne High, and there's been a back-and-forth in recent years over which schools will be replaced and which might instead be renovated.

Kamenetz, a Democrat, is in his final year as county executive due to term limits, and is running for governor. In his eighth and final budget proposal, he included \$30 million for planning studies to building two new high schools a " but did not specify which schools would receive the money. That will be up to the school system.

He made no mention of the high school projects in his 40-minute "state of the county" speech to the Baltimore County Council, though he speak generally about his record of school construction as county executive.

Councilman Wade Kach, who wants Dulaney High School in his district replaced, said perhaps it's a good idea to let the school board decide which projects come first.

"I would rather see specific money for all three of the schools," said Kach, a Cockeysville Republican. "But in order to avoid any kind of contention with that issue, to have the school board make that decision, I think that's a pretty good compromise."

Other council members said even more difficult decisions about school construction will fall to the next set of county politicians.

"I'm pleased that we're not raising taxes, but we need to have discussions about how to fund these schools," said Councilman David Marks, a Perry Hall Republican who has **Towson High** in his district. "That's going to be a discussion mainly for the next county executive."

"Planning money is one thing, but paying for them is a whole different issue," said Councilman Tom Quirk, a Catonsville Democrat who represents Lansdowne High. "It's going to be up to the next county executive and the next county council to figure out how we are going to maintain these promises and pay for them."

A replacement high school is generally expected to cost at least \$100 million.

As expected, Kamenetz's budget would continue a streak of more than two decades in Baltimore County without any increases in local tax rates.

The property tax rate is \$1.10 per \$100 of assessed value, meaning owners of a home valued at \$300,000 would pay \$3,300 in property taxes. The county income tax rate is 2.83 percent.

The main part of the budget, known as the general fund, is about \$2 billion. When state aid, federal aid and water and sewer payments are added to the county's general fund, the total county budget is nearly \$3.3 billion.

Kamenetz announced a few details of his budget in advance of Thursday's unveiling, including an increase in spending on grants to arts institutions, a "college promise" program that would spend about \$1 million to help low-income students pay community college tuition and \$8 million to hire additional police officers, counselors, social workers and other staff for public schools.

The budget plan also includes a 5 percent increase for the county's homeless shelters, more than 7 percent increase in aid to volunteer fire companies, a 10 percent increase in assistance to the Maryland Food Bank, adding a dozen neighborhoods to the rat eradication program and a 3 percent salary increase for county employees, including teachers, that kicks in next January.

Some county officials have cautioned that the county may be close to overextending itself in borrowing money to pay for projects such as renovating and replacing schools, while not saving enough money for retiree health care or emergencies.

The county maintains AAA bond ratings a "similar to an individual having a top credit score a" but the county's Spending Affordability Committee recently warned that if spending patterns don't change, the county might face spending cuts or tax increases in the future.

Kamenetz said his budget is within the guidelines set by the Spending Affordability Committee.

The county executive used most of his speech to reflect on his nearly eight years as county executive and 16 years before that as a member of the County Council.

He highlighted what he believes are some of his top accomplishments in two terms as executive, including outfitting police patrol officers with body cameras, building a new animal shelter, increasing diversity within the police and fire departments, reworking job-training programs and renovating and replacing aging schools.

He also touted new developments that have moved forward in recent years, such as the revitalization of the old Sparrows Point steel mill into Tradepoint Atlantic, new apartments and restaurants in Towson, the Foundry Row shopping center in Owings Mills and the Metro Centre mixed-use project in Owings Mills. He praised corporations that have relocated or expanded in the county, including McCormick Spice, Under Armour, Amazon and Stanley Black & Decker.

Kamenetz drew chuckles from the crowd in the council chambers when he reflected on his start in county government "as a young council member in my 30s: single, no kids, a full head of hair and a bushy mustache.

"Today, I'm married and the father of two teenage boys with thinning hair. I grew the mustache to look older, and I shaved it to look younger."

Kamenetz called it "an absolute honor and privilege" to serve Baltimore County's more than 830,000 residents.

County Council members will spend much of April and May scrutinizing the details of the budget in talks with Kamenetz's department directors. Council members have the authority to cut from the budget, but they cannot add to it or move money around. Last year, the council approved Kamenetz's budget with no changes.

The council will hold a public hearing on the budget at 6 p.m. on May 1 at the Historic Courthouse,

400 Washington Ave. in Towson.

Last year, no one offered input during the budget hearing. The council recently passed a law requiring two public hearings hosted by the county executive before the budget introduction, in addition to the council's public hearing. That measure will take effect next year.

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***Highlights: Towson High***