By Tina Kitt

The Wauneta Breeze

A significant hit in state aid funding, ongoing efforts to improve school buildings and a sharp rise in property valuations in the district are leading to an increase in taxes for property owners in the Wauneta-Palisade Public Schools District.

Tax askings on personal and real property will increase by $456,919 for the current year at Wauneta-Palisade with local taxpayers asked to pay $2,491,334 to cover budgetary expenses for the current school year. This marks increase of 22.46 percent over last year's total property tax askings of $2,034,415.

Property valuations are up 17.46 percent across the district, coming in at nearly a quarter of a billion dollars this year at $249,597,871 compared to the previous year's property valuations of $212,493,854. Much of this increase is attributed to an increase in the value of farm ground.

This increase in property valuations combined with an increase in the levy approved by the board Monday night will generate the nearly half million dollars in additional property taxes necessary to fund school operations and facility improvements this year.

Local property owners find themselves in the unfortunate position of having to make up a nearly $440,000 shortfall in state aid, with 2011-12 state aid funds pegged at $190,985 compared to state aid funding of $630,085 the previous year at Wauneta-Palisade.

School board members approved a $5.088 million budget for the 2011-2012 school year, down

slightly from last year's budget of $5.399 million.

Looking at past spending, however, it isn't likely the district will spend anywhere near that amount, with the administration penciling in totals to cover any worst-case situations that could arise during the school year.

Last year, for example, actual/estimated disbursements totaled $4,439,630, far below the $5.311 million budgeted amount approved in September 2010.

This year's combined tax rate of .9981 includes a general fund levy of .970094 and a special building fund levy of .028045.

Last year's tax rate was .9574 for the general fund. No special building fund levy was included in the 2010-2011 final tax request.

In his board notes, Superintendent Dr. Stan Sibley pointed out that due to the completion of construction process at WP this year's beginning balance of $1,657,060 was well below the previous year's beginning balance of $2,776,490 but still leaves the district "in a relatively strong cash position."

He also noted that even with the increase in property valuations it was necessary to increase the tax rate as the former levy of .9574 combined with the higher property values would only generate $335,000, instead of the $440,000 needed to make up for the loss in state aid funding.

Most school districts in the area have tax rates of slightly over $1 per $100 of valuation, observed board members.

Facilities work session

During a work session held prior to the budget hearing and school board meeting, board members and administration discussed the need for the development of an energy and operational cost savings program.

Dennis Van Horn with Trane Inc., of Omaha, explained that the feasibility study would look at facility heating/cooling systems and lighting systems as well as evaluate past weatherization projects like window and door replacements.

Data would be collected along with conducting a system evaluation and analysis of available options to help the district develop a plan for improving and maintaining facilities with an eye toward long-term cost-saving measures, like replacing windows and upgrading heating/cooling systems.

These possible cost-saving upgrades were mentioned by board members as they discussed the proposed budget, especially the $70,000 special building fund request and accompanying additional levy of .028045.

“It seems like a big increase but it’s prudent to make the building more energy efficient and more attractive to students,” said board member Allison Sandman.

Board member Stuart Bartels said he had conflicting thoughts, with the pessimist in him worrying about the longevity of the school district as money is plowed into buildings.

Other board members said they had concerns as well, but felt it imperative to keep looking to the future just as community members and school board members had before them.

“If we quit planning for the future we may contribute to our own demise,” said board president Jon Anderjaska.

The board voted to approve a resolution to enter into a performance contract with a qualified provider to facilitate a variety of facility improvement measures. Bids from qualified providers in adherence to the request for qualification process are being sought.

“This is just the start of the process, this does not tie us ine or obligate us in any way,” said Sibley.

Van Horn explained that in the process the district could formulate a short-term and long-term facility outlook with no funds expended until all the numbers are known and a contract signed.

Further business

In other business the board:

• Approved a concussion policy that includes a provision to have baseline assessments established for all 7-12 students at WP.

• Tabled an agenda item pertaining to the purchase of new trophy cases at a total cost of $12,000. Board members want to explore all options as well as the best location for new cases.