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In Sachem, no bracing for property tax hikes

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While taxpayers in other school districts brace for higher rates, Sachem residents can look forward to little or no hike at all.

This is the second year in a row that Sachem's superintendent, Charles Murphy, has proposed an overall zero tax increase for his district, which sprawls across portions of Brookhaven, Islip and Smithtown. The proposal was unveiled at a board meeting last week, along with a draft \$278-million budget that would increase next year's overall spending a modest 1.5 percent.

"We're giving back to the community that's given us so much," Murphy said. He has served as Sachem's schools chief for nearly three years, during which he has periodically shaken fellow superintendents with his calls to economize.

In Sachem's case, economizing was a virtual necessity. In the spring of 2005, before Murphy took over, local voters rejected a budget with a proposed 18.1-percent tax increase and the district was forced to pare student programs. Now such services gradually are being restored, the superintendent says, though he continues to take a hardheaded approach to budgeting.

Example: Sachem now requires teachers filling in for those on maternity leave to serve 40 days as substitutes before allowing them to draw full salaries and benefits. In the past such teachers drew full pay and benefits from the start.

Fred Gorman, a local taxpayer advocate who has criticized some school board members as big spenders, rates Murphy as an "astute, capable superintendent."

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