I was so pleased to see nearly 50 people at our board of education meeting on March 27. Typically, we have from three to five people at our meetings which take place every second and fourth Tuesday of each month. The larger than normal attendance was a result of an agenda item relating to the Leonardsville Elementary School. I was equally pleased that the community remained for a presentation on the 2018-2019 School Budget that the community will consider on Tuesday, May 15 (1-8 PM ES Café).

In 2019-2020, Mount Markham will celebrate 50 years as a centralized school district. In 1969, the Bridgewater, Leonardsville and West Winfield Central Schools combined and later became Mount Markham. As with any merger, there have been challenges, but overall, the benefits of a merged school district in terms of program and opportunities for our students have prevailed. Perhaps the greatest challenges have been experienced due to declining enrollment. Past school boards have faced the incredible challenge of closing two community school buildings, one in Bridgewater and one in Leonardsville. Feelings about these closures remain sensitive and remain on the minds of our community and our board of education.

The Leonardsville Elementary School completed its full time service to the district in 2001. Declining enrollment encouraged the decision to bring all of the district’s children to a consolidated campus in West Winfield. Since the closure, the district maintained the wonderful building, first, working with Assemblyman McGee and others to provide a grant funded pre-kindergarten program. When the grant money faded, the district committed to finding a qualified buyer who promised a sustainable plan for the building. Efforts to sell the building have continued for nearly a decade. All the while, the district has continued to maintain the building so as to prevent its deterioration. The past boards of education, who committed to maintaining the building, deserve our praise. The current board continued this commitment and recently had the opportunity to consider two purchase offers!

On March 27, the board agreed to negotiate a purchase agreement with the Unadilla Valley Baptist Church. The sale price of the building will be $100,000 and while the attorneys from both sides work out the details, the school board has asked that the sale be finalized by June 30, 2018. Pastor Brian Cook has shared a vision for the school that promises to spring life back onto the campus and community. While the church will use some of the building to support its various missions, other spaces will be rented to provide the revenue necessary to improve and maintain the building. The board was very grateful that both purchase offers came from community organizations.

In other news, the community members that attended the March 27 board meeting joined the board to hear a presentation on the 2018-2019 school budget. The board has been working on the budget since December. On March 30, Governor Cuomo and the NYS Legislature agreed upon a funding plan for its next fiscal year. The plan includes a modest increase in school aid for Mount Markham. Mount Markham receives approximately 70% of the revenue needed to provide its programs from Albany. This month, the board will decide upon the final budget plan that will be presented to district residents first at a public hearing on Tuesday, May 8 (7PM HS Auditorium) and then on statewide school budget vote and election day, Tuesday, May 15 (1-8PM ES Café). The board will likely consider a budget of just under $26.3 million. The current budget maintains all current programs and staffing, while adding one teaching assistant to support the elementary school. The proposed budget is likely to be approximately 2.1% higher than the spending plan that supports the current school year. In April, the school board will determine the tax levy needed to support the budget. Last year, the tax levy increase was 0%; in recent years, the board has sought to limit the growth of the tax levy, approving increases of .9% and 1.98%.

As superintendent, I am grateful for our board members. These community volunteers dedicate twenty or more hours to our district and its function each month. They are excellent stewards of our district and I know that they also appreciated the attendance of community members at our recent meeting. Please mark your calendar and join us at future board meetings and in particular, at our public hearing on the budget (May 8) as well as our budget vote and election on May 15.