



# Superintendent's Education Update

DATE: November 15, 2017

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## **General Fund Reserves – Fiscal Policies**

(By Olivia Meyers Buch)

A recent "As I See It" guest editorial in the Gazette Times suggested the board lower the level of reserves outlined in Board policy DA – Fiscal Policies, which was originally adopted by the board in February 2011 and then readopted in June 2013. A copy of that policy is attached for reference; it covers a wide array of fiscal policy topics including general fund ending fund balance, one-time nonrecurring revenues, budget accountability, financial reports, revenue estimations, equipment replacement, capital improvements, early retirement benefits, and cash carryover.

Following is information I provided to the board at its March 20, 2017, meeting. At that time, I recommended preservation of the existing general fund ending fund balance designations and further review of the language regarding access to the rainy day reserve, particularly the interpretation of what constitutes declaration of a financial emergency. The board discussed whether or not to revise policy DA; although consensus was reached at that time to leave it as written, the board could revisit the issue of reserves when 2017-18 budget parameters are discussed in January 2018.

### General Fund Ending Fund Balance

Per policy DA, reserves and ending fund balance designations include the following:

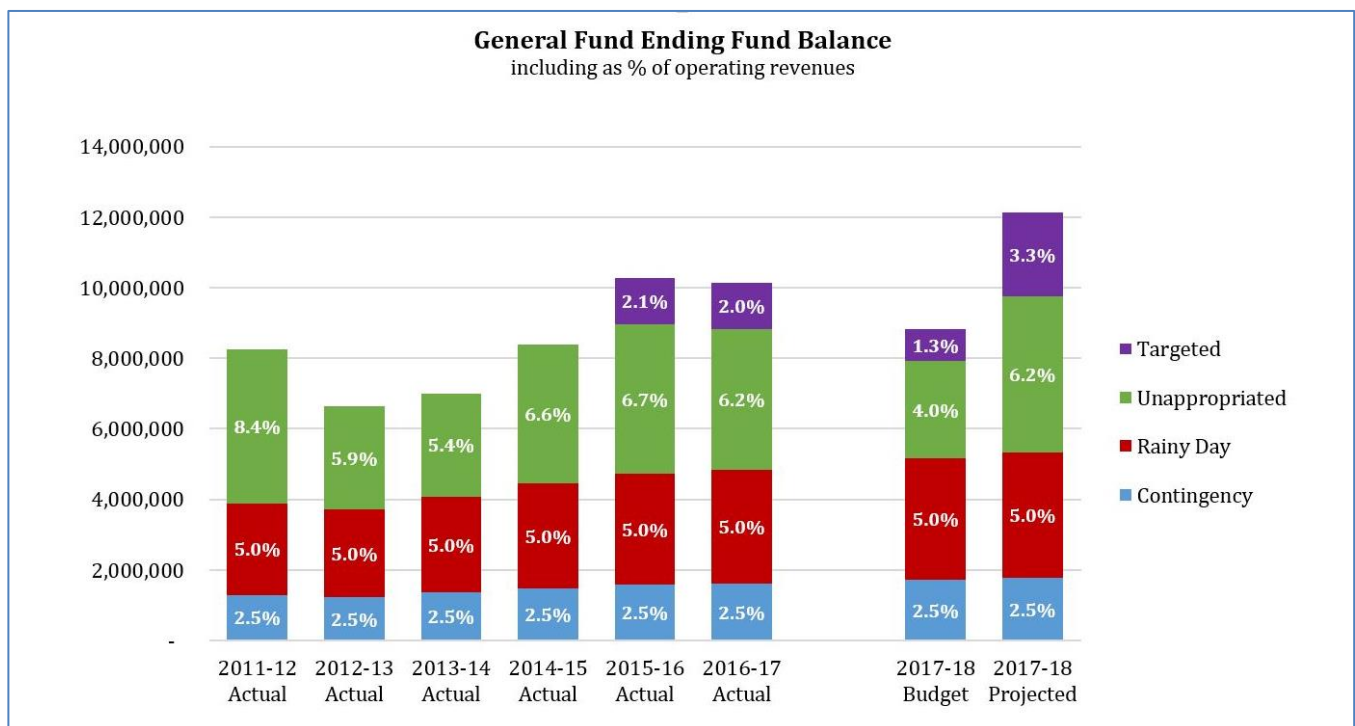
- Appropriated Contingency Reserve
  - 2.5% of general fund operating revenues (total resources net of beginning fund balance)
  - Used for unanticipated expenditures or for emergencies as approved by formal Board resolution
- Appropriated Rainy Day Reserve
  - 5% of general fund operating revenues
  - May be released for use in any year by an affirmative vote of a majority of school board members. Access is triggered when the State School Fund Formula, based on per ADMw estimates from the state for K-12 education fails to increase above prior school years, or when the Board declares a financial emergency
- Unappropriated Ending Fund Balance
  - 5% of general fund operating revenues
  - Unavailable for expenditures as not appropriated

- Targeted Reserves Ending Fund Balance
  - Allocated and designated for special purposes

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommends, at a minimum, that governments maintain an unreserved (not earmarked for a specific purpose) ending fund balance of no less than five to fifteen percent of its general fund operating revenues, or of no less than one to two months of regular general fund operating expenditures. Attached is “GFOA Best Practice: Appropriate Level of Unrestricted Fund Balance in the General Fund,” which provides additional details.

In general practice, levels of fund balance, typically, are less for larger governments than for smaller governments because of the magnitude of the amounts involved and because the diversification of their revenues and expenditures often results in lower degrees of volatility. Higher levels of unreserved fund balance may be needed if significant revenue sources are subject to unpredictable fluctuations or if operating expenditures are highly volatile. Due to the volatility of state revenues and PERS employer contribution rates, devoid of any significant changes concerning state taxation or PERS, I believe that our policy designations are set at an appropriate level.

The level of general fund reserves has varied over the last several years; in fiscal years 2013 and 2014 reserves were used to offset budget deficits, and in 2015-16 a new targeted reserve was established to offset future increases in PERS employer contribution rates. Below is the actual general fund ending fund balance for the last five years, and projected for the current year.



### Accessing Appropriated Rainy Day Reserve

The circumstances identified in the current policy that allow for access to the rainy day reserve are as follows: *“Access to the fund will be triggered when the State School Fund Formula, based on per*

*ADMw estimates from the state for K-12 education fail to increase above prior school years or when the Board declares a financial emergency.”*

Even though we anticipate increases in state school fund revenues over the next few years, there is a possibility that legislatively adopted allocations will not be enough to maintain the level of instructional programs and services we currently offer to students. The release of rainy day reserves would allow the district to deliver a sustainable level of programs through this anticipated period of economic regression.

Attachments:

- Board Policy DA – Fiscal Policies
- GFOA Best Practice: Appropriate Level of Unrestricted Fund Balance in the General Fund

## Fiscal Policies

### 1. General Fund Ending Fund Balance

The Corvallis School District 509J School Board works to ensure that the district delivers the best educational program available within the constraint of well-managed resources. To offer such a program the Board recognizes the importance of a budget that delivers sustainable levels of instruction, staffing, number of instructional days and maintenance of facilities.

The State of Oregon has a volatile tax structure which results in unstable levels of school funding. This instability can cause a significant variance in the level of programs school districts are able to financially support. Until such time that the state creates a stable tax system or a funding mechanism such as a Rainy Day Fund that will see Oregon schools through recessionary periods, the Board directs the superintendent to propose a budget that will allow for sustainability over a two-year period.

The proposed budget will create fund balances in an amount sufficient to:

- a. Allow the district to deliver a sustainable level of programs through anticipated recessionary periods;
- b. Protect the district from unnecessary borrowing in order to meet cash-flow needs;
- c. Provide prudent reserves to meet unexpected emergencies and protect against catastrophic events;
- d. Meet the uncertainties of state and federal funding; and
- e. Help ensure a district credit rating that would qualify the district for lower interest costs and greater marketability of bonds that may be necessary in the construction and renovation of school facilities.

The Board believes these guidelines support prudent fiscal planning. Reserves and ending fund balance designations include:

- a. Appropriated Contingency Reserve of 2.5 percent of the General Fund total resources net of the beginning fund balance. The Contingency may be used for unanticipated expenditures or for emergencies as approved by formal Board resolution;
- b. Appropriated Rainy Day Reserve of five percent of the General Fund total resources net of beginning fund balance. These funds may be released for use in any year by an affirmative vote of a majority of the School Board members. Access to the fund will be triggered when the State School Fund Formula, based on per ADMw estimates from the state for k-12 education fail to increase above prior school years or when the Board declares a financial emergency;
- c. Unappropriated Ending Fund Balance of five percent of the General Fund total resources net of the beginning fund balance (unavailable for expenditures as not appropriated); and

- d. Targeted Reserves Ending Fund Balance as may be allocated and designated for special purposes.

The superintendent shall develop a budget plan to establish the reserves and ending fund balance designations; or as directed by the Board.

2. One-time Nonrecurring Revenues

The budget should match ongoing expenditures to ongoing revenues. One-time resources should be used for one-time expenditures that will not create a continuing obligation for the district or an unsustainable level of expenditures, and should not be expended before revenues are received.

3. Budget Accountability

Accountability to the public to demonstrate the effective use of public funds is a district goal. The district provides information to the public in a variety of methods to accomplish this goal. Budget accountability is a key component of this goal.

The district will incorporate budget accountability as part of performance management for administrators and holds individual managers accountable for ensuring program expenditures stay within budgeted limitations. Budget performance will be a criteria for evaluating management effectiveness. The superintendent will require managers to report discrepancies in their plans versus what was budgeted. Managers will report on the status of their budgets and actions that they have taken to stay within limits at regular intervals to the business manager and superintendent. The business manager is accountable to the superintendent whom is ultimately responsible for the budget.

4. Financial Reports

The Board will receive regular financial reports that include estimates of expenditures for the district's various funds in comparison to budget appropriations, actual receipts in comparison to budget estimates and provide an update on the district's overall financial condition. Reports will keep the Board informed of significant changes impacting the district's overall financial condition due to changes such as state funding, demographics or other key factors. Supplementary reports will be furnished as needed or upon request by the Board or superintendent.

5. Revenue Estimation Policy

All revenue forecasts shall be conservative, though reflective of the latest, best information available. Revenue estimates shall be made through an objective, analytical process. The district will not include revenue in budget preparation that cannot be verified with documentation of its source and amount. Key assumptions will be presented in the budget document.

6. Equipment Replacement Reserves

The district recognizes the need for ongoing equipment replacement to effectively deliver educational services. Equipment includes technology, maintenance, major software or other equipment like items deemed critical to operations.

This district may establish a separate fund to manage these funds. Replacement funding cycles and designated funds will be identified by major equipment type and noted in the annual budget document.

## 7. Capital Improvements

Major facility and ground improvements will be funded through the most viable and economical method appropriate for the improvements. To assist in funding projects that are more significant in nature but not eligible for bond funding due to the scope or timing, the district may elect to budget an amount each year designated for this purpose. A reserve may be built to carry over from year to year to assist in funding stability.

Capital Improvements are defined within the following guidelines:

- a. Cost \$20,000 or more, and
- b. Be a permanent addition to the fixed assets of the district, and
- c. Purchase land, and
- d. Construct a new facility, or
- e. Remodel or add to an existing facility, or
- f. Construct/install public infrastructure, or
- g. Replace existing infrastructure including facility HVAC systems.

Any debt instruments proposed for capital improvements will be approved by the board.

## 8. Early Retirement Benefits

Early retirement benefits will be funded on a pay-as-you-go basis. The program will be valued by an actuary at least every other year for planning purposes.

## 9. Cash Carryover

To encourage responsible expenditure of budgets, 50 percent of unused budget appropriations for the General Fund will be made available to managers in the following year, or an alternative rate as recommended by the superintendent in the proposed budget document and as adopted by the Board. The Board believes that the current budget allocations should benefit primarily current year students.

END OF POLICY

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### Legal Reference(s):

[ORS 332.107](#)



## BEST PRACTICE

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# Appropriate Level of Unrestricted Fund Balance in the General Fund

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### BACKGROUND:

In the context of financial reporting, the term *fund balance* is used to describe the net position of governmental funds calculated in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP). Budget professionals commonly use this same term to describe the net position of governmental funds calculated on a government's budgetary basis.<sup>1</sup> While in both cases *fund balance* is intended to serve as a measure of the financial resources available in a governmental fund; it is essential that differences between GAAP *fund balance* and budgetary *fund balance* be fully appreciated.

1. GAAP financial statements report up to five separate categories of fund balance based on the type and source of constraints placed on how resources can be spent (presented in descending order from most constraining to least constraining): *nonspendable fund balance*, *restricted fund balance*, *committed fund balance*, *assigned fund balance*, and *unassigned fund balance*.<sup>2</sup> The total of the amounts in these last three categories (where the only constraint on spending, if any, is imposed by the government itself) is termed *unrestricted fund balance*. In contrast, budgetary fund balance, while it is subject to the same constraints on spending as GAAP fund balance, typically represents simply the total amount accumulated from prior years at a point in time.
2. The calculation of GAAP fund balance and budgetary fund balance sometimes is complicated by the use of sub-funds within the general fund. In such cases, GAAP fund balance includes amounts from all of the subfunds, whereas budgetary fund balance typically does not.
3. Often the timing of the recognition of revenues and expenditures is different for purposes of GAAP financial reporting and budgeting. For example, encumbrances arising from purchase orders often are recognized as expenditures for budgetary purposes, but never for the preparation of GAAP financial statements.

The effect of these and other differences on the amounts reported as *GAAP fund balance* and *budgetary fund balance* in the general fund should be clarified, understood, and documented.

It is essential that governments maintain adequate levels of fund balance to mitigate current and future risks (e.g., revenue shortfalls and unanticipated expenditures) and to ensure stable tax rates.

In most cases, discussions of fund balance will properly focus on a government's general fund. Nonetheless, financial resources available in other funds should also be considered in assessing the adequacy of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund.

### RECOMMENDATION:

GFOA recommends that governments establish a formal policy on the level of unrestricted fund balance that should be maintained in the general fund for GAAP and budgetary purposes.<sup>3</sup> Such a guideline should be set by the appropriate policy body and articulate a framework and process for how the government would increase or decrease the level of unrestricted fund balance over a specific time period.<sup>4</sup> In particular, governments should provide broad guidance in the policy for how resources will be directed to replenish fund balance should the balance fall below the level prescribed.

*Appropriate Level.* The adequacy of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund should take into account each government's own unique circumstances. For example, governments that may be vulnerable to natural disasters, more dependent on a volatile revenue source, or potentially subject to cuts in state aid and/or federal grants may need to maintain a higher level in the unrestricted fund balance. Articulating these risks in a fund balance policy makes it easier to explain to stakeholders the rationale for a seemingly higher than normal level of fund balance that protects taxpayers and employees from unexpected changes in financial condition. Nevertheless, GFOA recommends, at a minimum, that general-purpose governments, regardless of size, maintain unrestricted budgetary fund balance in their general fund of no less than two months of regular general fund operating revenues or regular general fund operating expenditures.<sup>5</sup> The choice of revenues or expenditures as a basis of comparison may be dictated by what is more predictable in a government's particular circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a government's particular situation often may require a level of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund significantly in excess of this recommended minimum level. In any case, such measures should be applied within the context of long-term forecasting, thereby avoiding the risk of placing too much emphasis upon the level of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund at any one time. In establishing a policy governing the level of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund, a government should consider a variety of factors, including:

1. The predictability of its revenues and the volatility of its expenditures (i.e., higher levels of unrestricted fund balance may be needed if significant revenue sources are subject to unpredictable fluctuations or if operating expenditures are highly volatile);
2. Its perceived exposure to significant one-time outlays (e.g., disasters, immediate capital needs, state budget cuts);
3. The potential drain upon general fund resources from other funds, as well as, the availability of resources in other funds;
4. The potential impact on the entity's bond ratings and the corresponding increased cost of borrowed funds;
5. Commitments and assignments (i.e., governments may wish to maintain higher levels of unrestricted fund balance to compensate for any portion of unrestricted fund balance already committed or assigned by the government for a specific purpose). Governments may deem it appropriate to exclude from consideration resources that have been committed or assigned to some other purpose and focus on unassigned fund balance, rather than on unrestricted fund balance.

*Use and Replenishment.*

The fund balance policy should define conditions warranting its use, and if a fund balance falls below the government's policy level, a solid plan to replenish it. In that context, the fund balance policy should:

1. Define the time period within which and contingencies for which fund balances will be used;
2. Describe how the government's expenditure and/or revenue levels will be adjusted to match any new economic realities that are behind the use of fund balance as a financing bridge;
3. Describe the time period over which the components of fund balance will be replenished and the means by which they will be replenished.



Generally, governments should seek to replenish their fund balances within one to three years of use. Specifically, factors influencing the replenishment time horizon include:

1. The budgetary reasons behind the fund balance targets;
2. Recovering from an extreme event;
3. Political continuity;
4. Financial planning time horizons;
5. Long-term forecasts and economic conditions;
6. External financing expectations.

Revenue sources that would typically be looked to for replenishment of a fund balance include nonrecurring revenues, budget surpluses, and excess resources in other funds (if legally permissible and there is a defensible rationale). Year-end surpluses are an appropriate source for replenishing fund balance.

*Unrestricted Fund Balance Above Formal Policy Requirement.* In some cases, governments can find themselves in a position with an amount of unrestricted fund balance in the general fund over their formal policy reserve requirement even after taking into account potential financial risks in the foreseeable future. Amounts over the formal policy may reflect a structural trend, in which case governments should consider a policy as to how this would be addressed. Additionally, an education or communication strategy, or at a minimum, explanation of large changes in fund balance is encouraged. In all cases, use of those funds should be prohibited as a funding source for ongoing recurring expenditures.

**Notes:**

1. For the sake of clarity, this recommended practice uses the terms GAAP fund balance and budgetary fund balance to distinguish these two different uses of the same term.
2. These categories are set forth in Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) Statement No. 54, *Fund Balance Reporting and Governmental Fund Type Definitions*.
3. Sometimes restricted fund balance includes resources available to finance items that typically would require the use of unrestricted fund balance (e.g., a contingency reserve). In that case, such amounts should be included as part of unrestricted fund balance for purposes of analysis.
4. See Recommended Practice 4.1 of the National Advisory Council on State and Local Budgeting governments on the need to "maintain a prudent level of financial resources to protect against reducing service levels or raising taxes and fees because of temporary revenue shortfalls or unpredicted one-time expenditures" (Recommended Practice 4.1).
5. In practice, a level of unrestricted fund balance significantly lower than the recommended minimum may be appropriate for states and America's largest governments (e.g., cities, counties, and school districts) because they often are in a better position to predict contingencies (for the same reason that an insurance company can more readily predict the number of accidents for a pool of 500,000 drivers than for a pool of fifty), and because their revenues and expenditures often are more diversified and thus potentially less subject to volatility.
6. In either case, unusual items that would distort trends (e.g., one-time revenues and expenditures) should be excluded, whereas recurring transfers should be included. Once the decision has been made to compare unrestricted fund balance to either revenues and/or expenditures, that decision should be followed consistently from period to period.