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Camden school budget is under wraps Camden officials say the \$341 million document is a draft. Open government advocates disagree.

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The Camden Board of Education has refused to release the \$341 million budget document approved Monday night.

The document was distributed to board members and collected from them after the vote. Members of the public and the media were not permitted to review it.

The board, which had to take action to meet a state deadline, released only the budget total but with sketchy details. The board plans to meet tomorrow to reexamine the budget, which contains about \$14 million in cuts, and consider other alternatives.

Harvey Johnson, board solicitor, refused to release the document contending that it was not a public record. Bart Leff, the district's public information officer, said yesterday the board would still not release the document.

"It's a working document. They're not done with it," said Leff, explaining why the budget document was withheld. "It's a draft, even though they voted on it."

Since the board took a vote, the document should be made public, said Heather Taylor, communications director for Citizens' Campaign, a statewide group that promotes citizen leadership.

"If the document's ready to be voted on then it should be ready for public view," she said.

"The school board budget represents a huge portion of a municipal tax bill and it's critical that citizens are able to review and comment and have a final say on what's in the budget."

Guy T. Baehr, corresponding secretary of the board of New Jersey Foundation for Open Government, which advocates for open records and open meetings, said that while the open records law exempts some types of working documents, a school budget does not appear to meet those criteria.

"This is supposed to be a democracy and people need to know what's going on in a timely way so if the public disagrees with this, they need to be able to make their objections known in a timely way and they can't do that if they don't have access to the information," Baehr said. "I think this budget should have been a public document when they put it on the agenda for the meeting because at that point it's no longer deliberative or advisory, they're about to

take action on it."

The Inquirer has filed a request for the document under the state's Open Public Records Act.

Under the pressure of today's state deadline, the board voted Monday to approve a \$341 million budget for the 2008-09 school year. The state Department of Education in late May rejected an earlier \$355 million spending plan because it called for an additional \$19.5 million in state aid.

The state insisted that Camden pass a budget based on \$279.5 million in state aid, a 2 percent increase over the current year.

The state also imposed a partial spending freeze.

On Monday, district business administrator James Devereaux presented the board with a budget document that brought the budget total down by various means, including program cuts and the loss of about 200 jobs.

At the meeting, board members voted to approve the budget amount, but did not agree on various specific cuts and economy moves that district staff proposed to reach the necessary bottomline.

During discussions at Monday's meeting and at another last week, program cuts and changes were alluded to, including the possible staff cuts.

Richard Vespucci, spokesman for the state Department of Education, which has oversight of the district, said his understanding was the document given to the board Monday night contained sets of recommendations as well as personnel information.

The Camden board has not yet given the state a budget but, Vespucci said, "We are satisfied the board is making a good-faith effort to balance its budget."

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