

Deep cuts in new school budget plan

By **John Hilliard**/ Staff Writer
Thursday, December 1, 2005

The School Committee has pitched a plan for deep budget cuts in fiscal 2007, and the board already has concerns about it.

"Make no mistake, the plan that we describe below represents a dismantling of the Wayland Public Schools," the School Committee wrote in a Monday letter to the Finance Committee.

School officials described the plan is a "compromise solution that in actuality offers no solution at all."

The committee's "Salvage Neighborhood Schools" proposal would cut nearly \$2.5 million - or 8 percent - from the School Department budget to meet the FinCom's guideline of \$26 million for FY07.

The town expects a \$3.3 million shortfall in the FY07 budget, with the FinCom setting budget guidelines that cut department budgets by 8 percent.

The guideline factors in a roughly \$1.4 million budget increase for salaries, utilities and transportation, then requires subtracting 8 percent.

While the School Committee's proposal no longer includes a controversial option to shut down an elementary school, the schools' proposed 8 percent budget reduction cuts more than 20 full-time staff positions, including all five school librarians.

District-wide athletics and extracurricular activities would be eliminated while reductions would hit the curriculum and professional development budgets.

Positions for an elementary reading teacher and a kindergarten through grade 5 math-science coordinator would not be cut from the budget.

In an interview, School Committee Chairman Jeff Dieffenbach said there is a possibility the plan could change, but he does not expect any "dramatic" differences from the plan his board approved unanimously on Monday night.

"We're not putting that option out there as an empty suggestion," said Dieffenbach.

Dieffenbach said the committee will work on a "recommended" budget that provides level-service funding for the schools in FY07.

"It's pretty clear an override is needed," he said. "Once we recommend a budget, we'll advocate for an override of sufficient magnitude to cover that budget."

FinCom Chairman Christopher Riley had not yet seen the School Committee's budget plan, but said it is premature to determine whether an override is needed for FY07.

He said the town's Ad Hoc Budget Advisory Committee is working on cost-saving options for next year. The budget committee had already identified about \$400,000 in savings, which would affect the 2007 shortfall.

"Until we finish that process ... the extent of any cut, frankly, won't be known," said Riley.

The Finance Committee will meet with all the major town boards in January, he said, and review departmental budgets. Riley's board requested town committees draft both a level-funded budget which includes needed increases and a version reduced by 8 percent.

In an interview, Superintendent Gary Burton said the proposed cuts in staff and programs would affect students' education well beyond FY07.

"These types of cuts affect a school system for years and years," he said.

He said a roughly 4 percent school budget increase could be needed to maintain existing services.

"I'm very well aware of the fiscal condition the town finds itself in," said Burton. "I do have an obligation to present a budget that is in keeping with maintaining (children's) education."

Burton will present that budget to the School Committee on Jan. 9, and a budget hearing

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will be held in February.

Dieffenbach said the board will focus on Burton's recommended budget unless the budget process suggests the 8 percent cuts must be carried out.

The School Committee has said a budget of about \$28.7 million is needed to maintain existing school programs and services. The current school budget is \$27.8 million and includes about \$500,000 in budget offsets.

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