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Familiar issues to pop up in '06

By **Katie Liesener**/ Staff Writer
Thursday, January 5, 2006

Families throughout Wayland marked the snowy beginnings to the new year with countdowns, celebrations and new calendars on the wall.

For town officials, however, the coming of 2006 primarily means one thing - finishing the budget for fiscal year 2007, which begins this July.

The Finance Committee will be developing the budget with input from the different town departments to present to the Board of Selectmen in April.

"The challenge is to maintain the quality and level of services on both the town and school sides while minimizing taxes," said Board of Selectmen Chairman Michael Tichnor.

The hiring of new Town Administrator Fred Turkington last year will be a major asset going into that challenge, Tichnor said.

He also hopes the town will reconsider a town center project, after the initial proposal failed to gain the necessary two-thirds approval at Town Meeting last year.

"We're in the process of taking another look at town center, to revisit the project over the next several months and bring a new proposal before voters," he said. "We have an unusually small commercial tax base that puts an extreme burden on residential taxpayers. Town center is one of our last, best opportunities to increase that tax base in Wayland."

Tichnor also identified creating affordable housing as a high priority going into the new year.

School Committee Chairman Jeff Dieffenbach predicted the two major issues for the town in the upcoming year will be the FY07 operating budget and the future of the new high school project.

"I'm confident that we'll put together a case for both to take to the town, knowing they're reasonable plans," he said. "Ultimately, it's at the will of the voters."

To win voters' favor for the high school project, Dieffenbach said, the School Committee may consider two possible changes in approach from the high school proposal that was voted down last year.

One possibility is to ask the town for design money with the understanding that any funding for actual construction would be contingent on state reimbursement. Another possibility, he said, would be to change the scope of the original project.

Budgeting issues and the possibility of building a new high school are not new topics of discussion in Wayland. But 2006 may prove to be unique in another way.

"We used to have overrides brought up for vote every three to five years. Now override requests come closer together because of health care costs, pension costs and cuts in state aid," Dieffenbach said. "What might be unique this spring is if an override is requested and passed for the second year in a row. The town hasn't seen two big overrides in a row."

Linda Segal previously served on the Board of Selectmen at a time when the town first began to feel the financial pressures of cuts in state aid.

"Before the state cut back on revenues to towns in '02, we weren't hurting as much. We had a significant amount of free cash," she said. "Looking forward, who was to know ... we would never make up for money lost?"

In looking to the future, officials stressed the need for planning. Segal pointed to the town's master plan as an important way to work toward a long-term vision for the town.

Tichnor looks forward to the upcoming creation of a three-year budget for the years subsequent to FY07.

"We've had long-term capital needs plans before, but as for (a budget plan), not quite to this degree in recent history," he said.

The three-year budget plan is important, he said, "so that if voting on an override, voters

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understand what's up in '08, '09, etc., and can take the longer view."

But for the immediate year, Tichnor, Dieffenbach and Segal all suggested the same New Year's resolution for Wayland in 2006: That residents treat each other with respect in public affairs, trusting their fellow residents have the best interest of the town at heart.

"I'm concerned that in 2006 people improve upon the way they treat each other in the public domain," Segal said. "Town government is not a perfect process. It's based on volunteerism. There are a lot of people who care, and care passionately about the town."

Tichnor looked to an event of the past year for inspiration. He said the town's efforts to help the town of Waveland, Miss., in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, was an example of how the town is able to come together.

"The town should be very proud of what it accomplished," he said. "Those volunteers are true role models for what a town can achieve."

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