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School budget would require an override

By **Michael Wyner**/ Staff Writer
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The Wayland School Committee's recommended budget for the 2006-07 school year of \$28.5 million would require a "substantial" override, according to School Committee Vice Chairman Robert Gordon, as outlined at a budget forum last week.

"We made it clear to the Finance Committee ... that in no uncertain terms (not approving) this budget represents the beginning of a dismantling of the schools," said School Committee Chairman Jeff Dieffenbach.

Even the previous threat of closing the Happy Hollow School is still "not off the table ... if we don't have the budget to deliver the kind of numbers that we're recommending."

The School Committee is hoping the Finance Committee gets on board its "level services" budget, which would for the most part maintain the programs and staffing of the current school year.

One area where the committee is proposing a cut is in reducing the number of elementary school specialists in art, music, gym and the library from 3 to 2 full-time positions.

Even this one proposal elicited a half-hour of statements at the end of the forum from the affected teachers on why the number of specialists must remain at 3, with each statement followed by applause from the audience.

"Presently 2.4 teachers teach 1,276 Wayland elementary boys and girls. The proposed change is to have 2 full-time teachers between all 3 schools," said Loker School physical education teacher Carrie Scheer-Bourget, who is the parent of a kindergartner and second grader at Loker.

"In the case of Loker and Happy Hollow, the '06-07 full-time teacher would teach 30 classes a week. This is at least an additional 130 students - each with their own personalities, learning styles, strengths and needs ... Much needed planning time will be replaced with travel time between schools."

Scheer-Bourget said having 2 teachers at 3 elementary schools would be a "huge setback."

Tracy Scheidemantel, who attended Wayland Public Schools, graduating from the High School in 1983, said at the end of the forum that she and her husband opted to buy "less" house and pay higher taxes in Wayland in order to gain access to the top-notch schools.

"I had full confidence that the ever-present, tireless, undeniable community support for the schools, which I had come to know as a student, would best suit our highest hopes for our kids," she said. "I proudly told my husband about the incredible teachers, enriching specials, Latin banquets/trips, swim and diving team, drama presentations, wide range of after-school sports, high academic standards, small class sizes and many other opportunities afforded my classmates and I. Unfortunately, I fear I am in a position of eating my words."

School Committee member Barb Fletcher pointed out the cost drivers involved in keeping up a "level services" budget each year, including salaries, which make up 81 percent of the 2005-06 budget, health care, pensions and utilities.

According to Dieffenbach, Wayland has the second highest teacher salaries in the state behind Boston, and "we're proud of that."

However, Dieffenbach noted that Wayland's per pupil expenditure is 73rd in the state, and about 13th amongst peer towns.

A continual complaint by the School Committee and residents at the forum centered on aid from the state government, which committee members say has not been keeping up with inflation.

"Send a letter to your state senator and representative, and make sure you copy the leadership of the House and Senate and copy the urban legislators," said Dieffenbach. "They are the ones who really aren't aware of what it means to be in the suburbs. They see big homes and big cars, but they don't see every driveway and every house."

A breakfast for town officials from the "suburban coalition" will take place on April 10 at the State House in Boston.

Preservational budget

Overall, Fletcher said, "Our objective for the 2006-07 budget has been to recommend a budget that is preservational in nature, but mindful of fiscal constraints facing the town currently by making targeted cuts."

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In addition to dropping a specialist in the elementary schools, other reductions include removing the equivalent of 1.5 full-time positions at the Middle School, and cutting some central office functions.

Dieffenbach said enrollment is going up in the Middle School and High School, and dropping at the elementary level, with the result that elementary classes will be consolidated from 63 to 60.

"What we've tried to do is spread the pain out as much as possible, and spread the gain out as much as possible," said Dieffenbach.

During the question-and-answer period, one question that kept coming up was the athletic and activity fees. For the 2006-07 school year, athletic fees will be going up from \$125 per season at the High School to \$200 per season, while the Middle School will increase from \$50 to \$100.

The instrumental music fee in the elementary schools will now be \$150 per year.






"I think we're getting close to the point where we will start to see an erosion of participation with these fees," said Gordon.

Wayland Teachers Association President Conrad Gees, a fifth-grade teacher at the Happy Hollow School, said if drastic cuts are made in the schools, it would take years to bring back the programs.

"I don't want the override to fail. It will totally decimate what have here," Gees said.

In addition to the operating budget, the School Committee will also be presenting various capital requests to Town Meeting in April, including \$200,000 for technology, \$200,000 for building maintenance and \$700,000 for Happy Hollow roof replacement.

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