

SCHOOL BOARD NOTES

This month's article is entirely devoted to the FY10 budget for the Westford School District. Since some members of the community may choose to vote by absentee ballot prior to receiving their Town Report, we wanted to include all the information in the February Newsletter and on the town's website.

Results of Public Input: As a result of public input received at the January 15th meeting the board cut \$36,600 from the proposal it was considering at that time by:

- Eliminating the proposal to add a world language offering for K-4
- Eliminating the proposal to add a new entrance/exit door on the west side of the building
- Reducing the amount budget for settling the teachers contract

Tax Impact: The resulting budget increases by 1.5% over FY2009. The tax impact is as follows:

- For those who pay based on income no increase in the rate. In fact someone with a constant household income of \$50,000 will pay \$85 less than they did three years ago.
- Based on the most recent information from the state the homestead property rate would also remain the same based on the budget but must be adjusted by the CLA (Common Level of Appraisal). The CLA adjustment results in a \$31 per \$100,000 of assessment increase.
- Non-homestead property is any property you own that is other than your residence and all its contiguous acreage. The non-homestead rate is set at the state level and is not directly tied to the school budget voted in any one town. Next year the base rate is expected to be \$1.35. After adjusting for Westford's CLA the rate will be \$1.88, four cents more than the present year.

The following is the complete school budget report which will appear in the Town Report. Please contact a member of the board if you have any questions.

SCHOOL BOARD BUDGET REPORT

The Westford School Board is grateful for the support the Westford community has shown for its school district by passing school budgets each year. We are fortunate to serve in such an engaged and caring community, qualities that are essential to a high quality educational system.

At a time of great economic uncertainty in our lives, the school board worked particularly hard to balance the needs of taxpayers with the need to maintain the high level of educational quality our district presently enjoys. As you know, the board has systematically reduced the number of certified teaching staff as the enrollment in our elementary school has declined. Unfortunately, classroom sizes in the upcoming year do not allow for the elimination of a classroom teacher. As a result of public input at the January 15th meeting, the board made further cuts of \$36,600 to the budget presented at that meeting. The following adjustments were made: reversing a proposal to add world language exploration for grades K-4; eliminating the proposal to add an exit/entrance door to the west side of the building; and reducing the amount we budgeted for settling the teacher contract being negotiated for FY2010.

To provide additional context to the following budget information, Westford's per pupil spending, as defined by the state, is \$320/pupil less than the statewide average for FY2009. Act 82, the law enacted two years ago requiring two votes on some school budgets, will not apply to our school district this year. Since our spending per pupil is less than the statewide average and since our proposed education spending does not exceed the allowable inflationary factor, we pass both "tests".

The proposed FY 2010 budget represents an increase of \$77,831 or 1.52%. The effect on taxes will vary according to whether one pays based on property or income and whether the property is residential or nonresidential. The projected tax impacts are explained later in this article.

EXPENDITURE CHANGE HIGHLIGHTS: (The numbers shown are not exact but have been rounded to the nearest hundred.)

Wages and Benefits:

- The net increase for wages is \$54,500. The board is in the process of negotiating a contract for the next school year. We have included our best estimate of what it will cost to settle the contract. If we are able to settle for less, the over budgeted money will carry forward. We have budgeted for a decrease of .5 FTE in our administrative assistant staffing. We propose increasing the FTE for our math specialist from 0.715 to 0.8 to further assist students who are not meeting state standards. There is an increase of 1 FTE in our paraeducator positions to meet special education requirements and to assist with a new model for our Pre-K offering. That new model will result in a .4FTE reduction in the Pre-K teacher position. (Please see a further explanation of our Pre-K program later in this article.)
- Benefits are increased by \$14,400. The good news in this area is that our health insurance premium increase for next year is 0%. The increase is due to adding health insurance coverage for the additional paraeducator and small increases in other benefits line items.

Pre-K Program: Our Pre-K program serves two purposes. One is to educate students who qualify for Essential Education Services, often referred to as EEE. We are required to serve these children who have special needs. We have also served other three and four year olds in the community who would benefit from a preschool program. Research shows that quality preschool experiences can make a marked difference in later success in school. We have benefited from a state grant (\$30,000 this year) for many years which, when combined with the special education funding for the EEE students and the portion of the base education amount allocated for Pre-K, allowed us to operate our program entirely with offsetting revenues. This year the Department of Education has decided to make school districts reapply for the grant. We will reapply but we are very concerned that we won't get the grant or that it will be for a much smaller amount. We spent a great deal of time during our budget deliberations on this subject. We wanted to continue to serve the same number of children yet felt the model needed to be changed in order to minimize the impact of the potential loss of the grant.

Presently we run two classes for approximately 2 and ½ hours four days per week and serve 16 children, eight in each class. We employ a full time teacher to teach the classes. This teacher also serves children from birth to kindergarten conducting evaluations, family visits, screenings, child find activities and doing special education paperwork. The proposed budget is built on a model of 1 class of 13 students meeting for 2 and ½ hours four days a week with a paraeducator assisting in the classroom. The model meets state requirements for preschool. In order to be eligible for the grant we have traditionally received, the state is requiring districts to enter private/public partnerships for this population so we have also contracted for 3 slots for 10 hours per week with a private provider in the area that serves Westford children. The money we receive through the state funding system will cover most of the cost of these slots. Parents who wish to enroll their children for more than 10 hours will pay for any additional time. If the slots are not used the school district won't have to pay for them. We believe we can continue to provide a high quality program with this new model.

High School Tuition: High school tuition is increased by \$33,600. We project that we will have the same number of high school students and will be charged for slightly more technical education students. A projected 4% increase in tuition rates charged by the receiving high schools accounts for most of the increase in this area.

Special Education: Significant cost changes for special education net at an increase of \$28,000. Much of this increased expense is offset by increased revenue from the state. We are budgeting for a \$35,000 increase in professional services and a decrease of \$7,000 for tuition to other schools. These costs are determined by the special education needs of the students enrolled in our district.

School Board and Treasurer: The net of the significant changes in this portion of the budget is a decrease of \$700. Our CCSU assessment will increase by \$6800. This increase will give Westford an additional day (increase from one day to two) of support from the CCSU's educational technologist. This person provides expertise to classroom teachers to assist them in enhancing their instruction through the use of technology. The decrease in this area is a savings of \$7500 because we do not have to do an external audit next year.

Maintenance and Operations: The significant changes in this area of the budget net at a decrease of \$38,600. Last year's budget included \$10,200 for design and engineering work for fixing our driveway and parking areas. We were very fortunate to have this work completed by two Westford community members so the amount we budgeted for this item will be carried forward. Last year we budgeted for replacing all the locksets to make the school more secure at a cost of \$9,300. Finally, we purchased a new tractor at a cost of \$19,100. For a number of years now we have been budgeting \$15,000 - \$20,000 per year for major maintenance work. We had hoped to spend that money next year to add an exit/entrance door on the west side of the school. As a result of public input it was removed from the budget.

Student Transportation: Transportation costs are budgeted to decrease by \$13,300 due to a decreased need for transportation to outside placements.

REVENUE HIGHLIGHTS:

Fund balance: The amount of revenue from the fund balance will decrease by \$50,000.

Tuition: We anticipate no tuition paying students next year resulting in a revenue loss of \$5,250.

Federal revenues: We anticipate that federal revenues will increase by \$25,400 based on our child count.

State special education revenues: These revenues will increase by \$94,400. The revenues are directly related to the cost of special education for the students in our district.

State placed students' special education reimbursement: This revenue will decline by \$78,700 due to a change in students.

FACTORS AFFECTING TAX RATES:

Equalized Pupil Count: The number of equalized pupils used to calculate our per pupil spending and the level of state support will decline by 3.77 from 375.59 to 371.82.

Education Tax Rates: The base rates for two of the three education tax categories are expected to change again this year based on the health of the education fund.

- The base rate for those who pay based on income (are income sensitized) will remain at 1.8%.
- The base rate for homestead property will likely be reduced by 1 cent from \$0.87 to \$0.86. (By law the rate is \$1.10 but is changed each year based on the revenues in the Education Fund.)
- The base rate for non-homestead property is also likely to be reduced by 1 cent from \$1.36 to \$1.35. (By law this rate is \$1.59)

Base amount per equalized pupil: The base amount for each equalized pupil will increase from \$8,210 to \$8,544.

Common Level of Appraisal: The CLA for Westford is declining again this year from 73.92% to 71.66%. These declines in CLA should stop as property values level off. Because the equalization study is based on three years of sales it will take a little while longer.

TAX LIABILITY: The following charts show the tax liability impact of the proposed budget for various types of taxpayers. The anticipated changes in base rates are assumed.

Income based tax liability:

FY 10 % of income	2.47%
FY 09 % of income	2.47%
Change	(0.00%)
Impact: \$50,000 household income	No tax increase

The following are the income rates for the past four years:

FY 2007	2.64%	FY2008	2.62%	FY2009	2.47%	FY2010	2.47%
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Homestead property rates: (after CLA adjustment)

FY10 projected rate	\$1.648
FY09 actual rate	\$1.617
Change in rate	\$0.031 (1.92%)
Impact per \$100,000	\$31.00 increase

Non-homestead property rates: (after CLA adjustment)

FY10 projected rate	\$1.88
FY09 actual rate	\$1.84
Change in rate	\$0.04
Impact per \$100,000	\$40.00 increase

The non-homestead property rate has no direct relationship to the school budget. The rate is determined at the state level and then is adjusted by the CLA for Westford.

CLA adjustments complicate one’s thinking about the impact of a school budget proposal. An historical perspective on equalized tax rates, rates that are not adjusted by CLA, provides a better sense of the effects of school budget changes and the changes made at the state level to the base rate. The following are equalized homestead rates for Westford for the past few years:

FY07 \$1.395	FY08 \$1.266	FY09 \$1.195	FY10 \$1.181
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DRIVEWAY/PARKING LOTS PROJECT:

In a separate article, voters will be asked to decide whether or not to approve the issuance of a bond to finance a project to repair and renovate the school’s driveway and parking lot. The bond would not exceed \$250,000 and would be re-paid over a period of twelve years with annual payments ranging from \$20,000 to \$33,000 and beginning in FY11. The project is intended to improve safety, reduce the maintenance requirements and improve access. Additionally, considering the current economic situation, this may be an ideal time to get the best possible price for this work.

Financing: Expenses would be sourced from two other areas of our recurring budget to avoid a negative tax impact. Each year our payment is reduced for the 1993 addition. The reduction will be applied to the new bond payment. Additionally, the amount we typically spend for major maintenance work (referenced earlier), would be deferred to the extent necessary to source the remainder of the bond payment.

Safety: Currently, the flow of cars and buses is mixed and there is not a clear walking path from the main parking lot. The proposal separates vehicular traffic by establishing a bus drop-off on the west side of the school and a one-way parent drop off on the east side. Additionally, a sidewalk would be installed along the main parking lot and leading to a crosswalk near the main entrance of the school.

Maintenance: The school’s driveway, parking lot and sidewalks are in poor condition – broken, cracked and heaving. There are also sidewalk areas too narrow to plow. The proposal will replace all the asphalt and concrete and makes all sidewalks wide enough to plow with the tractor. The new surfaces should easily last fifteen years without further maintenance.

Access: Presently, handicapped access is limited. The proposal carefully considers handicapped requirements from parking spaces to sidewalks to entrances.

SUMMARY:

We have prepared a budget that we feel meets the educational needs of our students while being mindful of the burden placed on taxpayers in a difficult financial time. We greatly appreciate your past support of school budgets and hope you will support this one as well. Further, we urge your thoughtful consideration of the bond vote for our driveway and parking lots.

Martha Heath Beth Lane Nathan Lavallee Andre Roy Jennifer Townsend