

Schools: Override required for 2004 budget

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Without an override, School Superintendent Dr. Harry Harutunian said Thursday that he will have to trim at least \$2.8 million from the school budget he recommends for the next fiscal year.

Tonight, Harutunian will present the School Committee with a prioritized list of line items he will trim from the budget proposal. Ninety-nine percent of the items on the list are personnel, Harutunian said.

Harutunian is recommending a \$29.37 million budget for fiscal 2004, a \$2 million increase over this year's \$27.29 million school budget.

The superintendent anticipates spending more in three budget areas: \$1.3 million in salaries, \$600,000 in special education, and \$160,000 for utilities including heating, where he said he anticipates a jump in the cost of fuel oil.

At the same time, Harutunian said he expects reductions in three areas: \$600,000 in state Chapter 70 education money, which could rise to \$1.2 million if state aid is reduced by 20 percent instead of 10 percent; \$180,000 in additional state aid; and \$130,000 in Parker Middle School reimbursement. The School Department would shoulder two-thirds of that \$900,000 total, he said.

The school budget, as recommended, needs an operational override, Harutunian said.

"The town will not be able to generate enough revenue to support the \$2,075,732 need-

Salaries, aid reductions said to drive call to raise revenues

ed," Harutunian wrote in his budget memo to the School Committee. With uncertainty over state and federal aid, "We are moving forward a budget that shows the minimal increase we will need to open the schools in the fall of 2003."

School Committee member Tim Twomey recommended that the committee see whether voters would support an operating override "so the school system will not be ripped apart." The sooner an override question goes to voters before May 1, the better, Twomey said.

"This year's [recommended] budget represents a minimal increase, which provides for maintenance of most, but not all, staff positions and existing programs in the Reading Public Schools," Harutunian wrote.

"The administration has tried, when possible, to make sure that the budget reflects" four items, he wrote: "Known increases in utilities and insurance; the minimal amount for the mandated Education Reform Act of 1993; realistic funding for students with special educational needs; and salaries for negotiated contracts."

Among the guidelines Harutunian said he used to develop his recommended budget:

- Maintain reasonable pupil/teacher ratio, which the superintendent defined as class size below the mid-20s for students in kindergarten through Grade 2, and in the mid-20s for students in grades

three through five;

- Redistrict kindergarten students to fully utilize space in the other schools;

- Fund curriculum initiatives to allow curriculum adoptions to proceed with predictability; and

- Fund building maintenance at a level which will maintain town and school buildings for the future.

Harutunian distributed a list of 2004 "minimal budget increases" in five budget categories:

- Regular day: up 5.7 percent, from \$16.78 million to \$17.73 million;

- Special needs: up 12.6 percent, from almost \$6.6 million to \$7.4 million;

- Custodial/maintenance: up 8 percent, from almost \$2.5 million to almost \$2.7 million;

- Other school services: up 9.1 percent, from \$722,000 to \$787,000; and

- Administration: up 3.8 percent, from \$713,000 to \$740,000.

About two dozen parents and two Finance Committee members attended the meeting.