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Vote 'no' on Question 1

By Catherine Pratt / Guest Columnist

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The current discourse concerning school projects highlights problems and questions that affect our financial state. These topics should be addressed before we commit to any further debt.

One of the major problems is that the state has no money, at least in part because the School Building Assistance program is so out of hand that it now rivals the Big Dig.

SBA owes \$5 billion dollars to cities and towns for building projects underway or already completed. SBA also has 350 projects that have been approved and put on a waiting list. At an average of \$20 million per project, this adds \$7 billion more for a total of \$12 billion dollars. Little wonder that the state is facing a shortfall of \$2 to \$3 billion for fiscal 2004.

The SBA problem is exacerbated by the fact that some communities misrepresent their needs. SBA, lacking the staff for proper oversight, takes on projects that it should reject. Unfortunately, Reading provides an example. In the "letter of intent" package that we submitted to SBA in early December, our materials imply that RMHS is overcrowded! On one form we list the capacity of RMHS as 1,299. A letter submitted by one of our officials states that our proposed project will expand our capacity to 1,400, thus meeting our needs for several decades. I find these conflicting statements reprehensible and am saddened that our town resorts to such tactics. (For those who may not know, RMHS was expanded in the early seventies to accommodate 2000 students; it reached its enrollment peak of 1800 in the late 70s.)

We should not count on getting any money from SBA. Its days are numbered. Once the new administration has an opportunity to study the situation, SBA will probably be eliminated or seriously curtailed.

Of course, like the state, the town also has no money, mainly because the state has none to hand out. Had we been frugal during the good times like some communities, we would have reserves to sustain us during the bad times. Since we were not frugal, the selectmen are considering not only a trash fee, but a \$5 million override - which they say will raise taxes for the average homeowner \$625 per year.

In the future we must not spend every cent that comes our way, and we should subject all sizable expenditures to the "Who benefits?" test. Any expenditure that does not benefit a substantial number of Reading citizens should be rejected.

Two recent expenditures do not pass the benefits test. One is the special election on Feb. 25. At a cost of

\$13,000 the only beneficiaries are those architects who might want to bid on the new high school if the proposal passes, and a small group of Reading citizens who belong to Building Pride and hope for a blizzard on Feb. 25 to keep the "no" voters at home. We could easily have saved \$13,000, but Mr. Hines was the only selectman to vote "no."

The recent decision of the school committee to seek a consultant to help select a new superintendent also fails the benefits test. In this case the only beneficiary is the consultant. Citizen volunteers are much better able to select a fitting superintendent for Reading than a consultant who does not know the town.

In closing let's try the benefits test on the proposed new high school. Who will benefit if the proposal passes? The public will not benefit. As our taxes go up, our property values will decline. Instead of a solid, stately memorial building, we will have a tacky replacement that looks more like a strip mall than a high school. We will lose 300-400 seats in the auditorium, a lecture hall. and a gym.

Nor do the teachers benefit. They have 20 fewer classrooms, and they lose both their department offices and work space and their well-situated dining room.

Nor do the students benefit. They will have nothing more than they would have in the current space of a renovated RMHS; in fact, because the Option 3 building design is smaller, they will have less.

So who does benefit? The architects, of course.

We must vote "no" on Feb. 25. Then we must set about restoring fiscal sanity, accountability, and the highest of principles to our town affairs.

Catherine Pratt is a Reading resident, and taught business classes at RMHS.

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