

# Emotions, issues run high at third school committee forum

6/12/01

By OWEN MACDONALD

READING - Emotions and issues alike circulated with high velocity around the Senior Center common room last night, as roughly 40 people showed up for the third community forum held by the School Committee.

The forums were set up, said School Committee Vice Chairman Pete Dahl, to give the School Committee an opportunity to open communication between school officials and residents who feel their concerns have not been heard or accommodated by the School Department.

"It has been said there has been a disconnection in town, and we are here to try to end that," said Dahl.

Topics ranged from school busing to curriculum to the high school renovation project, as well as some direct criticism of the actions by some School Committee members and Superintendent of Schools Dr. Harry Harutunian.

The discussion, indeed, started on a personal note, as Town Meeting member Ray Porter asked for a public apology from Dahl, the result of an exchange of letters to the editor in the local newspapers during which Porter said he felt he was personally attacked by Dahl over issues Porter raised about the most recent Town Meeting sessions.

"I think Mr. Dahl is one of the

reasons the discord exists in this community," said Porter.

Dahl, for his part, apologized for the tone of his most recent letter, but did not back down from what he said.

"I'll apologize for the tone of the letter, but I stand by the

statements I made," said Dahl, who said his intent during the exchange was to defend the integrity of Town Meeting.

The discussion drifted from issue to issue as the night went on. One woman, who said she

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## MWRA Board of Directors set to approve FY02 assessments

# Reading set to see 2.9% increase in fees

READING - The MWRA Board of Directors is expected to approve this week a fiscal year 2002 combined total water and sewer assessment increase of 35 percent to its member communities.

However, Reading, which receives only sewer service from the MWRA is expecting to see an increase of only 2.9 percent.

Reading sewer fee for 2002 is currently set at \$2,732,923 up from this year's figure of \$2,656,586.

For the average household in the 21 communities that receive both MWRA water and sewer services, the new draft increase translates into an approximate combined annual water and sewer bill increase for MWRA costs of \$12 from FY01.

Communities that receive only sewer service from MWRA will see assessment increases averaging 1.4 percent. The assessment for water services, however, will increase by 9.8 percent, reflecting MWRA's ongoing capital spending for water system improvements in the treatment, transmission, and storage of drinking water.

The final assessments follow an extensive four-month review of next year's budget by the MWRA Advisory Board and the Board of Directors during this review, the \$518 million budget proposed in February 2001 was cut by \$10 million bringing the final FY02 operating budget to \$508 million.

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# Mosquito spraying tomorrow

READING - The East Middlesex Mosquito Control

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## Forum...

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was a relatively new resident, raised the issue of providing district wide busing.

Harutunian said that busing was eliminated in the early 90's due to cutbacks. Currently, a "pay-as-you-go" bus exists at the high school level, but funding, safety, travel time, and collection issues have precluded district wide implementation. Others at the forum told of years where neighborhood buses had been funded by parents, but had since ceased.

Despite the roadblocks, the resident said it was an issue she was highly interested in, and spoke of seeking out other parents who would support it.

"Where there's a will, there is a way," she said.

The discussion also turned to the high school periodically. While the vibe among the forum participants seemed to support something being done at the school, there was less agreement on what exactly that "something" should be.

Dorothy Marshall introduced the issue, calling the current building "a disgrace."

"It is almost as if they don't want people to go there," said Marshall.

Another perspective came from long time resident and Town Meeting member Bill Brown.

"There is no question of the need for repair at RMHS," said Brown. "I will not vote for any money for plans for the high school until the landfill is sold."

Still others took issue with the School Building Committee's (SBC) approach, which will deliver one, comprehensive solution to Town Meeting, though what that solution will be is

undecided as of yet.

Emerson Tucker, who aired his views at earlier forums, echoed his own criticisms, saying that giving the voters only one, single option is the equivalent of a slap in the face.

"I am insulted by that," said Tucker.

School Committee member and SBC liaison Tim Twomey defended the SBC's process, and noted the SBC is attempting to address the charge given to them by Town Meeting. In the end, said Twomey, it will be the community's decision whether to support the plan or not.

Another fixture in local politics, Gerry MacDonald, bridged one of the major gaps in the discussion; that being an unwillingness in the community to seek a \$50 to \$60 million override to renovate a building which, he feels, is not being properly maintained. MacDonald called for the School Department to turn over the maintenance work to the town side.

"The school administration is in the education business, and they don't belong in the maintenance business," said MacDonald.

Several issues also surfaced last night that have continually been bones of contention between the School Department and some residents.

Dr. Robert Mandell took the floor to offer his version of enrollment figures to the audience. Mandell has been a vocal critic of the School Department figures, and the use of those figures to support the Sunset Rock elementary school project.

Linda and Gary Phillips, also vocal critics of some of the School Department's actions, also butted heads with school

officials over a number of issues, including the credibility of the School Committee and the Superintendent, "black-listing" of those who request public documents, and a number of issues surrounding the plans for the new elementary school, and the ten taxpayer complaint that was born out of that.

Gary Phillips and School Committee member Bill Griset briefly clashed after Phillips questioned why the School Department spent \$5,500 to move the Superintendent's deposition date for the 10 taxpayer suit. Phillips also questioned other costs that the School Department made public but did not, in Phillips' mind, provide adequate documentation to support.

Griset, however, pointedly rebuffed the suggestion that moving the Superintendent's deposition date was improper. Griset indicated that the plaintiff's attorney had sought to depose Harutunian on the first day of school, something he termed a tremendous disruption.

"We had to go to court to keep our Superintendent in district on the first day of school, and I would do it ten times over again," said Griset.

Others, like resident Charles Herrick, said he felt that there was an atmosphere in town that said, "If you vote against the schools, you are uninformed."

Herrick said over the years the School Committee has developed "a major credibility problem," especially after the latest school project was debated and voted on in town.

While the discussion, and in some instances, arguing, went on for nearly four and a half

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While the discussion, and in some instances, arguing, went on for nearly four and a half

hours, the School Committee did get some ideas on how to improve communications. A town wide mailer, either paper or electronic, as well as more public forums, topped the list of ways the School Department can communicate better. A column in the local papers and a quarterly call-in show on RCTV were also suggested.

The discussion will likely be as lively at the final installment of the School Committee's public forums, which will be held on Wednesday, June 13, at 2 pm at the Reading Public Library meeting room. Chairman Sue Cavicchi said that the School Committee will hold an open meeting after all the forums are completed to discuss the issues that were raised.

Harutunian indicated that he and the School Committee welcome all comments and criticisms.

"I would ask you to try to help us be better at what we're doing," said Harutunian.

## - Chronicled -

• A Wilmington man in custody for disorderly conduct damaged his cell in excess of \$100 Monday at 1:53 a.m. Reading Police will charge him with malicious destruction.

• A Sunnyside Avenue woman reported her garage windows broken Monday at 9:28 a.m.

• Youth dug up bushes at Reading Public Library Monday at 5:35 p.m. Damage is estimated at \$100.

## Friends of the Reading Library Meeting

All Friends of the Reading Public Library members and

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Fifty-eight percent of the amount is earmarked and principal the short and long term. That MWRA must finance the construction of new facilities and needs and improvement regional water and structure.

"Various components of the 10-year Integrated Facility Improvement Plan including the Metro Supply Tunnel, are under way," said MWRA Executive Director Frederick Key. "New operations under tight rein, but the tunnel project and necessary system improvements makes a budget unavoidable if we continue the service to customers -- and environmental and public health laws -- demand."

MWRA has included major initiatives in its costs in the proposed

• Residuals Process: MWRA has a contract to barge, market sludge from the land Treatment Plant year period. The new one of the largest private partnerships water/wastewater utility U.S., plus upgraded at the plant, will save a million next fiscal year.

• Deer Island Plant Use of electricity generated on island generators, fuel a new hydroelectric facility save \$500,000. A new contract saves an additional \$700,000. Operational cost of the secondary treatment will save another \$

• Continued efforts staff more efficiently: has reduced filled positions about 250 positions (15 four years.

# Grant