

## 'The insatiable appetite'

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To the editor,

The recent articles regarding the superintendent's proposed budget increase of 7.5 percent and the School Committee's approval of 4.6 percent budget increase with "long faces and heavy sighs" is part of the annual theatrics the superintendent and school committee give to the unsuspecting community and vulnerable "Budget Parents." This behavior is not new to the veterans who have been for years exposing the insatiable appetite of the school department and school committee for a larger portion of town funds.

The superintendent and school committee does not tell you that in Fiscal Year 2001 they provided the same education for the same number of students that we have today for \$5 million less. Since the 2001 budget, the school dept. has increased staff positions by 41, mostly to staff the new Wood End School — even though they claimed they "only needed" to hire four positions, a principal, nurse, secretary and custodian with the teaching staff coming from the other existing schools. And, the 2008 budget has them wanting to hire yet more. A check on the school committee's financial performance over the last few years is due.

Since 1997 the average school budget has increased nearly 6 percent.

The school dept. says that the total budget increase of 4.6 percent for fiscal 2008 does not provide a level service budget while contractual pay increases are only at 2.5 percent. Four years ago only a .9 percent increase or \$245,000 covered contractual pay increases for a level service budget.

Additional state funds always show up after Town Meeting approves the budget. This 2007 fiscal year the school dept. will receive an additional \$783,000 increase with an additional \$300,000 increase in Circuit Breaker reimbursement revenue that is not listed in their 2007 budget. How will those funds be spent?

The four school renovations and building of a new elementary school since 1997 has negatively affected the town's bond rating. No other community has pursued school building projects with such frenzy, adding more debt before earlier debt is paid off and in such a short time period.

Very few other communities if any, allow school building projects to be paid for without an override (Debt Exclusion) to fund the debt. With the exception of the \$2.5 million override for Wood End, the "mortgage" money for the Wood End and Barrows' School renovations comes directly from the town's operating budget that funds other town services and schools because there was no override to fund them. Just paying for those two debts reduces the town's operating budget by over \$1 million dollars annually. This does not include the additional \$400,000 operating costs for the new Wood End School that we didn't need.

No other community in the state allows a school committee to act as a school building committee to building schools. State law requires towns that build schools to appoint a town municipal building committee to do the job. Managing the educational and financial responsibility of the school department apparently is not a full time job?

The most recent school building projects were substantially over budget with very poor oversight from the school committee/school building committee. Contractor profits could only be maximized with quality downgrades and size and scope reductions approved by the School Committee:

- Wood End was over budget by \$2 million even with quality downgrades such as cheaper wood siding and half-sized elementary classrooms against state regulations.
- The Barrows renovation was over budget by at least \$1.7 million.
- The high school project is over the initial budget by \$2.3 million and is still with many modifications, not yet complete.

The school committee's inability to manage its operating budget and school building projects causes great concern for many of us. The school department needs to learn to curb their appetite for excessive funds and live within their means like all responsible town residents must do.

If you do not demand your area Town Meeting representatives to hold the school department and school committee accountable for every dollar they spend, then we make hard times harder for an increasing number of people in our community. And, this will only reinforce public education's belief that dollars can always exceed the need because it is being done "for the children."

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