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Refusal to meet galls parents, leaders

By Grace Rubenstein
Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- Parents and some community leaders are angry because selectmen refused to join a forum with the Finance and School committees to discuss the coming year's budget.

They say more communication among all leaders would benefit the town, with North Andover facing millions of dollars in cuts.

Parents and some officials are still troubled that selectmen bowed out of what was supposed to be a joint meeting of the three boards but was canceled because selectmen refused to attend.

With town and school services facing millions of dollars in cutbacks for the coming year, communication is critical and separate hearings are no substitute for the joint meetings, said those supporting the combined hearings. Selectmen argue that history has shown the joint meetings to be contentious and counter-productive.

"It's a real point of frustration," said School Committee Chairman Daniel J. Murphy, a supporter of combined meetings, of the lack of dialogue among boards. "It would seem to me, given the criticism in the past of our town leaders misleading the public in some way ... the more transparent we can be in our discussions, so that voters and residents in town understand exactly what's going on, the better off we're going to be."

The refusal to meet is "immature and irresponsible," said Dawn Crescitelli, PTO vice president at the Bradstreet Early Childhood Center, who added that "quite a few" parents were upset by selectmen's unwillingness to participate. "As a taxpayer, I would be most appreciative of the triple-check to ensure our schools and town departments are as well provided for as possible."

Better communication could ultimately improve the spending

plan and ease tensions that have flared between the boards over past budgets, she said. Bradstreet parent Kellie Reid said separate meetings also deprive the public of a chance to hear town and school officials debate the spending plan.

However, selectmen said they fear a three-way forum would deteriorate into a tug-of-war between town and school spending, even though Finance Committee Chairman Jack A. Watkins said it was intended to "develop a sense of collegiality and understanding as to what our objectives were and what obstacles we might have along the way."

Selectman Rosemary C. Smedile said the consensus of her board was that joint meetings in the past "have been extremely confrontational, where strong words are exchanged, and it actually hinders a consensus."

The ill feelings generated at past meetings are counter-productive and do not serve the public or the budget process well, she said. The better approach, she argued, is for the three boards' representatives -- Town Manager Mark H. Rees, Finance Director Joyce H. Hanlon and Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian -- to work together on developing the budget, as they did in the months leading up to the release Monday of Rees' \$65.1 million spending plan.

Selectman James M. Xenakis agreed, saying there is plenty of opportunity for the public to comment at the boards' individual hearings.

Ted Tripp, president of the North Andover Taxpayers Association, called the three-way forum a "minor issue" and said he does not believe residents are being shortchanged by the lack of a joint forum. With the budget set to go on the town's Web site as early as today, information is readily available to the public, he said.

Although the boards could still decide to have a joint meeting, Smedile said she would need to see an agenda before deciding and Xenakis said he has no interest in it.

Selectmen and the Finance and School committees will ultimately recommend a spending plan to the May 10 Town Meeting. Voters will make the final decision.

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