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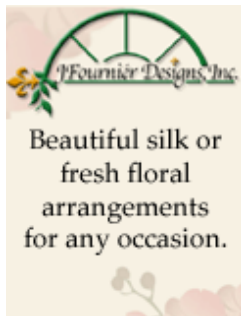
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News

FinCom: Special ed surplus could save jobs

By **Davin Wilfrid**

Staff writer

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NORTH ANDOVER — Citing a projected \$1 million surplus in this year's special education budget, the Finance Committee wants school officials to justify their request for an 11 percent increase for the same program next year.

But School Committee Chairman Alfred M. Perry said a scandal involving Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian has taken top priority, so the committee is unable to offer a good explanation right now.

"I've got a bigger problem right now," Perry said. "I know they want an answer, and I'd love to give it to them, but right now I don't know. If there's an extra million in there, we certainly want to know about it."

The School Committee has maintained a \$2.7 million shortfall in next year's budget could cost between 50 and 65 school jobs. Part of the schools' budget request calls for an increase in special education funding from \$8.97 million to \$9.9 million.

But finance officials say the \$9.9 million request could be \$1.5 million or more than is necessary, a discrepancy that could save many of those jobs. Last week the Finance Committee sent a memorandum to the School Committee demanding an explanation for the larger budget request before it makes its recommendation to the May 8 annual Town Meeting.

"What we're saying is, 'Show us where we're wrong,' " said Finance Committee member Stephen P. Dawe.

Perry received the request from the Finance Committee, but has been too consumed by the Harutunian scandal to offer concrete

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answers. The School Committee is in the process of investigating Harutunian's affair with special education secretary Brenda A. Shea, and whether the 29 percent raise Harutunian gave her was linked to the relationship.

Perry said the problem was compounded because the new special education director, Cheryl Raimondo, has only been in office a few weeks. Former director Jackie McVeigh retired earlier this month. Perry asked Raimondo to compile as much information as possible for the Finance Committee and plans to hand it over to them immediately.

Harutunian, who is on vacation while the committee investigates his behavior, did not respond to an e-mailed request for comment. Assistant Superintendent Richard A. Bergeron referred all questions to Perry.

In February, Harutunian said increasing costs can be blamed on increases for occupational and physical therapists, increased transportation costs and an expected increase in the cost of sending some North Andover students to private facilities for education.

Dawe said he was given an up-to-date expense report for the special education program from Town Accountant Lyne Savage. The data, provided to The Eagle-Tribune by committee Chairman Keith W. Mitchell, indicate the program has spent \$5.47 million of its \$8.97 million budget for the year ending June 30.

Factoring in \$1.5 million of contracted costs plus salaries and other predictable expenses, Dawe said, he believes the program will finish the year at a total budget of between \$7.7 million and \$8 million. Both Dawe and Mitchell stopped short of saying money was hidden in the special education budget.

"I am still not willing to claim malfeasance on anyone's part," Dawe said. "I'm claiming over-conservative budgeting. Let's not lay off teachers because of expenses we think we might have to pay. That's what God made stabilization funds for."

The stabilization fund is essentially a cash account meant for use in emergencies only. The Finance Committee has made it a priority to rebuild the fund after years of using the money to balance the budget.

BOX:

North Andover special education funding, 2004-2006

Fiscal year#2004#2005#2006#2007

Budgeted#\$7.62m#\$8.65m#\$8.97m#\$9.86m*

Actual#\$7.46m#\$7.57m#\$5.47m**#N/A


* From School Department fiscal 2007 budget request

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Husband Michael
Burke, Robyn &
Husband David Hay
Grandchildren,
Great-Grandchildre
Sister Marie,
Brothers Frank & B
Best Friend
Bob Giurado and
All Who Knew &
Loved You