

# School department gets top grade in audit report

By Michaela Kennedy

The Jamestown School Committee at its Feb. 1 meeting heard good news concerning the district's fiscal budget. A group of 20 or more parents and concerned residents attended the presentation of the proposed education budget, which included the annual audit report.

In the audit report, Paul Dansereau of Parmelee, Poirier and Associates told the committee that the school district had a surplus of \$11,000. He praised the district for its well-managed budget in the past year, and cited no problems. "You are overall in very good order. We like to come to towns like these that are run well," he said. Dansereau noted that because less than \$500,000 was spent in federal grant money, the district was exempt from federal audit requirements this year.

School Committee Chairwoman Cathy Kaiser asked the auditor if a fund should be set up to offset liability "in terms of the town's bond rating." Dansereau said that a fund would have little impact on the bond rating, since bond agencies were "not looking at that right now."

According to Fitch Rating, a global rating agency, Jamestown has a stable bond rating.

The school board went on to review of the proposed 2007-2008 budget. Superintendent Robert Power presented school operating budget increases over the last three years. "Jamestown Schools are in good shape financially. We have been careful with our resources and used our money wisely," he

noted.

Power also pointed out that the new budget reflected an effort to economize "while bringing more resources to our students who are talented in the arts and excel academically." He emphasized the positive environment of the island. "At this point, we're not in a situation like other communities. We're not in court, and we're not slashing and burning."

Committee member William "Bucky" Brennan noted that 50 percent of the budget increase came from retirement. "Relating to benefits and retirement, we're looking at a 10 percent increase but almost zero for education," he said.

According to a handout to board members, the budget calls for a 4.99 percent increase for the upcoming year, with the overall town's expenses increasing 5.19 percent. Kaiser reminded the board that under the new Rhode Island law the statutory cap limits the town budget increase to 5.25 percent. Committee Vice Chairwoman Julie Kallfelz nodded and added that the cap was scheduled to decrease for the next six years. "Every year it will ratchet down a quarter percent until 2013," she said, bringing the cap to four percent.

Director of Student Services Beth Pinto presented the budget for special education, and highlighted reductions that have been made. "Not only have we created good programs for kids, but we have been able to pull in some of those costs by bringing programs back into the school," she said.

Programs that benefit the special education students "also benefit the kids at large," Pinto added, pointing out that out-of-district tuitions were reduced. According to the report, the special education percentage of the total operating budget is 16.3 percent.

In addition, Pinto said that the special education programs at the Melrose and Lawn Avenue schools save money. "Currently, there are no out-of-district placements for students in preschool through grade six," she noted. Only 10 students, from grades 8 to 12, are currently out of district, according to her report.

Pinto clarified information published in a recent Sunday Providence Journal article on special education in Jamestown. "The ProJo narrative was correct. The data chart was not," she said. For those looking for accurate statistics, Pinto mentioned five sources of data available for viewing — Infoworks, Insite, KidsCount, Census, and the state performance plan, all accessible online.

Addressing unfunded mandates, Pinto reported that 40 regulations for Rhode Island Special Education are not required or exceed the federal requirements of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act. The money available "does not cover the mandates we are required to fulfill," she added.

He looked for opportunities to bring programs in to the district, "taking an empty space where we would benefit our kids and also save money," Power said.

Out-of-district tuition was reduced by \$80,000, and salary re-

ductions were recommended "with regret," Pinto said. According to the report, the special education teacher's position is recommended to be reduced a quarter of one percent, while the suggested reduction in the wages of the school psychologist is from .6 to .5 percent of full-time pay.

Kaiser said it was time to ask the Jamestown Town Council and legislators for help with unfunded

mandates. "If you want to impact anything, you should act now. Talk to your School Committee and legislators," she urged all present.

In a discussion about food service, Brennan made a motion to approve the food service proposal, which the five-member board passed unanimously. Kallfelz noted that a request for proposals for a new food service provider for next year would be announced.

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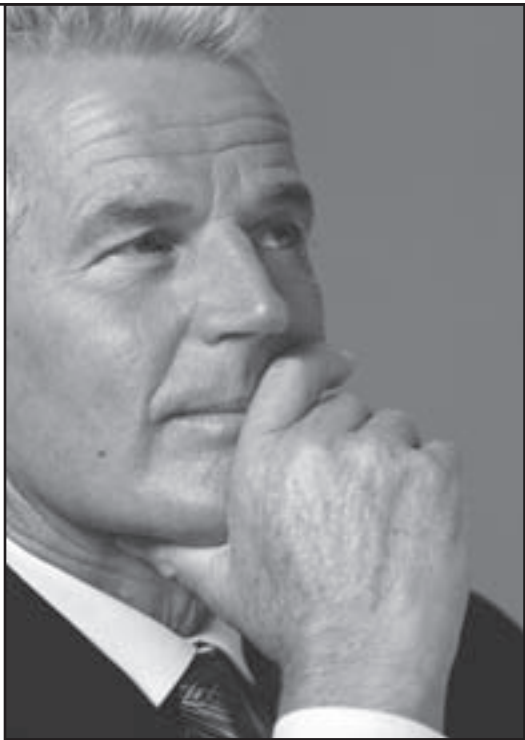
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