

School operating budget for next year unveiled for scrutiny

By Michaela Kennedy

The School Committee opened discussion of the district's operating budget for year 2009 at the committee's Jan. 24 meeting. Superintendent Marsha Lukon and a team of administrators presented an overview of the \$11.8 million proposal.

Lukon introduced the budget draft by highlighting major increases that impact costs, such as salaries, employee and retiree benefits, and tuitions. Government mandates and regulations as well as strategic plan goals were also factors driving the proposal.

The initial budget offering to the school committee came to the table with a suggested increase of a little over \$740,000, 6.6 percent above the current budget.

Lukon gave some answers to the question of how the budget is funded. General fund contributions and transfers from the current school fund balance would help to offset costs. In addition, state aid, pre-school tuitions and Medicaid reimbursements were listed as revenue line items. Federal reimbursements from Impact Aid would not reach the hands of the district until next fall, so it would be applied to the following

year's budget.

Principal Kathy Almanzor projected at least 10 percent of next year's total school enrollment would be military. The pre-kindergarten count has been consistent at about 40, and 45 students are expected for kindergarten. "There could be fluctuating numbers, depending on the military," she predicted.

Staffing changes showed a reduction of three Special Education teacher assistant positions, but a replacement of the 190-day assistant principal with a full year principal at Melrose Avenue School added \$6,500 to the cost.

Robert Fricklas, director of student services, addressed special needs for students in his department's section of the budget. Fricklas reminded the committee that the special-ed goal was to implement researched-based practices regarding effective teaching habits. "The bottom line is, inclusion works, and it works for the rest of the special needs student's life," he said. He defended small class size, saying, "It's an approach in keeping with research and our strategic plan."

Fricklas pointed out that a positive impact to the student services

was the district's new regulation about tutoring. "The line item should go down by spring of '09, thanks to our new policy," he added.

Fricklas outlined initiatives for next year, which included a response to an intervention initiative, a summer computing institute at the University of Rhode Island, and a community-based learning project initiative.

William "Bucky" Brennan, representing the facilities committee, outlined the capital budget, which will be funded by a transfer from the school department's unreserved fund. The proposed capital reserve was down over 19 percent from the previous year. "We have a lot of projects, but we're not advocating as much spending as last year," he noted.

Brennan pointed out that the proposed cost of the new principal's office was only for the design. "It does not include the cost of construction," he said.

Landscape architect Betty Hubbard gave a landscaping design pro bono, but another \$5,000 was needed to complete the plan.

Lukon talked about the need for software that would accommodate a state-mandated conversion to a

new chart of accounts, with a price tag of \$55,000. After some discussion of whether the state would come up with money to cover this expense, Lukon said, "We hoped we could eliminate this, but it is a state mandate nevertheless."

Jane Littlefield, the interim business manager, reviewed updates in comparison to last year's budget. She told the committee an enterprise fund needed to be created since the district was running its own food program, a change from the community's previous reliance on food service provided from North Kingstown's food service contract.

Committee member Bruce "B.J." Whitehouse asked about rising school book prices.

"Last year we budgeted \$6,600, but spent about \$8,900," he remarked. Littlefield admitted that books were getting more expensive, and more books per course were needed.

In recognition, the school committee extended its condolences to the family of Ethel Kitts. Mrs. Kitts was a beloved member of the school community who will be missed and remembered by generations of Jamestown students.

Newport Art Museum upcoming exhibitions

The Newport Art Museum's winter schedule features three new exhibits running through April 30. "Missions: Paintings by Roger Kirby" is on exhibition until April 6, with an opening reception on Thursday, Feb. 14, from 5 to 7 p.m., and a gallery talk on Thursday, Feb. 21 at 6 p.m.

"20th Century Works on Paper: Recent Gifts" will run from Feb. 9 to March 30. An opening reception will be held on Thursday, Feb. 14, from 5 to 7 p.m.

The 2008 Newport Annual Members' Juried Exhibition in the Cushing Gallery will be held from

Feb. 15 to May 11. An opening reception is scheduled for Thursday, Feb. 14, from 5 to 7 p.m., and a gallery talk is slated for March 13, at 5:30 p.m.

In addition, a popular exhibition will remain at the museum slightly longer than expected. Visitors will be able to view highlights from the Providence Art Club collection in the Studio Gallery throughout the winter.

The Newport Art Museum is among the five percent of museums accredited by the American Association of Museums, the highest recognition of a museum's commitment to accountability and public service, professional museum standards, and excellence in education

and stewardship. It is among the oldest art associations in America.

For more information, visit www.newportartmuseum.org or call 848-8200. Admission to the museum is \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors, \$4 for students and military with valid ID. Members and children under 5 are free.

Library to host poetry appreciation reading

The Jamestown library will host a new poetry reading, writing and appreciation group to meet on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month, at 12:30 p.m., in the

Sydney L. Wright Museum.

The first meeting will be Wednesday, Feb. 13.

Leading the group will be Katherine Dunham. She has an extensive background in teaching and playing music as well as writing stories and poetry. Her purpose with this group is to spread the reading, writing and appreciation of poetry, to teach people to read poetry out loud, to understand it, and to feel it.

Sign up is not required. The meetings are free and open to the public. For more information, call the library at 423-7280.

MURPHY'S LAW

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The current boom in residential construction on Conanicut Island has some similarity to the post-WWII boom. However, the magnitude of many of the houses being built now, both from scratch and as rebuilds, boggles the mind, and makes some of the summer "cottages" built around the turn of the century seem modest and appropriately sized.

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Back in the late Forties and early Fifties, men who lived or worked on the island, acquired lots from owners of farm land, and built modest homes for their families. And Jamestown's village grew to pretty much its current configuration. The farmland in the village is nearly all gone now, and there are fewer and fewer "in-fill" lots available.

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A big difference in today's building process is the scale of procedural hurdles that must be cleared to obtain the permits necessary for even a single residential structure. In many instances, a "team" approach, directed by an architect, engineer, and attorney, is required to successfully wend one's way through the labyrinthine process.

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A true Rhode Islandism: Amending place names by use of the possessive case: Hull's Cove, and Taylor's Point are two local examples of this phenomenon. But in some cases, the instinct of the Rhode Islander corresponds to the reality, as in Potter's Cove. But, in any instance, you can always tell a true Jamestown by the way he or she pronounces Fort Wetherill.

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