

# School Committee foresees a fiscally challenging 2009

By Eileen M. Daly

Financial considerations will remain a top concern for Jamestown schools in 2009, according to School Committee members.

Chairwoman Cathy Kaiser expressed concern regarding the uncertainty of state aid. "We know that with the current economic crisis there will be changes in state aid, but we don't yet know how much or when," Kaiser said.

The possibility of losing aid mid-year is a serious concern, according to Kaiser. "We anticipate that aid to cities, towns and school districts will be reduced in the upcoming fiscal year, but we also fear the possibility of a more immediate, mid-year reduction in aid. Losing aid mid-year would create significant problems for schools statewide, since districts are required by state law to operate in the black, but are prohibited by law from laying off certified personnel mid-year," Kaiser said.

School board members Julia Held and William "Bucky" Brennan share Kaiser's concern. "The budget will certainly be our biggest challenge," Held said. Both Held and Brennan cited the Rhode Island Property Tax Relief Act of 2006 (S-3050) as a factor in the current fiscal challenges facing schools in Jamestown. The act places restrictions on the amount the tax levy can grow annually with a 5.25 percent increase set for fiscal year 2008, followed by decreases of 0.25 percent per year until FY 2013, when it reaches 4 percent. "While the bill limits the rate of increased revenue, costs have gone up more than ever," Held said.

Mandatory restrictions combined with the current economic crisis will make 2009 especially challenging, according to Brennan. "The decrease in state aid will collide with the S-3050 legislation that caps levying additional taxes," Brennan said. "We will need to develop a really good plan in order to respond."

Held pointed out the conflict between mandatory spending and the limits of the Property Tax Relief Act. "We can't just reduce costs because many of the school costs are mandatory, Blue Cross and retirement expenses, for example," Held said. There is little room for reduction of costs due to this mandatory spending, according to Held.

Nonetheless, committee members are dedicated to finding ways to cope with these challenges. "What do you do? You do what you can," Held said. "We will be looking to wring every ounce of efficiency out of our current spending."

Both Kaiser and Brennan advocate a long-term outlook in response to the current fiscal concerns. "The School Committee needs to work closely with the administrative team to create a longer-term, multi-year financial plan," Kaiser said.

Brennan agreed with this assessment. "I think we need to develop a five-year plan in order to prepare for the combined effect of decreased aid and the limits of S-3050," he said. "Most businesses have a five-year plan. We also have a business department that can crunch the numbers and

see what the impact will be down the road. By developing a five-year plan we will be better able to evaluate what measures will be needed to meet the caps," he said.

The uncertainty of available state aid makes developing the budget especially difficult, according to Kaiser. "The school committee will have its first look at the proposed 2009 budget on Jan. 22. In the past several years, our challenge has been to maintain services and meet contractual obligations while staying within the tax cap. This year, not knowing how much aid to expect puts school districts in a precarious position," Kaiser said. "In the worst case scenario, total loss of state aid could put Jamestown over the cap before we even begin to factor in contractual obligations."

Another cause for concern, according to Kaiser, involves the possibility of state consolidation plans. "It is crucial that the School Committee work with our legislators to ensure that Jamestown has a voice in any consolidation plans discussed at the state level. While we have actively sought, and will continue to seek, opportunities to collaborate with neighboring districts, we are wary of any multi-district regionalization or administrative consolidation plans crafted at the state level. Small districts, particularly small districts deemed by the state to have 'high tax capacity,' will be the losers in any plan that bases representation on size or merges financial liabilities," Kaiser said.

While budget concerns are on everyone's mind, committee member B.J. Whitehouse would like to make sure the focus does not turn away from Jamestown's children. "It is our duty and prudent responsibility to educate children the best we can to prepare tomorrow's leaders for challenges, occupations and responsi-

ble citizenship. As far as money, nobody wants their taxes to go up, certainly not me. But, if we are to produce the finest intellectual, civic and cultural qualities from our students, we will have to pay for it," Whitehouse said.

Both Whitehouse and Held referred to the new curricular initiative, "Rigor and Relevance," that has been introduced in Jamestown schools over the past year. "The administration and faculty have been hard at work this past year at incorporating a curricular initiative known as 'Rigor and Relevance.' Jamestown schools are part of a nationwide consortium of schools that wishes to build on what we have to make good schools into great schools. I strongly support the initiative and will strongly support its continuance into the future," Whitehouse said.

Held expressed similar enthusiasm for the program. "This initiative provides a framework for curriculum instruction that encourages learning in deeper ways," Held said. "Students are encouraged to develop independent thinking rather than simply regurgitate facts." According to Held, the two most significant challenges facing the school committee this year are budget concerns on the one hand and the most important goal of continued improvements in education through programs like "Rigor and Relevance," on the other hand.

Despite these significant challenges, committee members remain optimistic about their ability to rise to the occasion. "I think we can do it," Held said. "It won't be pretty and it will be a huge challenge, but we have a hard-working administration and a dedicated, capable school committee. I have confidence in our leadership within the schools and I know we will be looking out for the education of Jamestown's

children."

Kaiser echoed this sentiment. "There are a lot of question marks, but the one thing I am sure of is that all staffing and re-allocation decisions, however difficult, will be based on student achievement priorities," Kaiser said.

She wouldn't mind getting a

little help along the way, however. "My 'wish' for the New Year is that legislators will make heroic efforts to do the preliminary budget work necessary to give districts a timely estimate of state aid levels so that school committees can make informed budget decisions," she said.



## Holiday postcard

The Jamestown Community Farm became a winter wonderland on Dec. 20 following the season's first major snowstorm.

Photo by Jeff McDonough

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