

Superintendent's Message

January 2010

The New Year at Rockland Public Schools has begun with some good news. The district has received a grant from the Department of Energy Resources to fund energy conservation improvements at our three elementary schools. The grant totals \$149,750 and includes such items as window replacements, door replacements, and insulation. These are all projects that cannot be funded under the school budget this year.

The school budget is an overriding concern as we go forward and I have made several presentations to the Finance Committee, Building Committee, and Selectmen on this topic. As you may have heard or read, I have asked the Selectman to hold an override vote for a sum of \$1.7 million for the Rockland Public Schools. I want to take this opportunity to explain how we got to this point.

Beginning last June, the school district was part of a group that included the Chair of the Board of Selectmen, the Town Administrator, the Chair of the Finance Committee and the Town Accountant. We met informally to discuss how we could proceed to determine if an override was necessary and how much was required. As a result of these meetings, departmental and school budgets were submitted in September some four months earlier. Through an exhaustive process with the administrators and the School Committee, we determined that to maintain current services in the district, we need a \$1.7 million increase in the school districts budget for next year. This number, it is necessary to keep in mind, is based on level funded local aid.

The first question that I am sure occurs to you is why do the schools need this much money. The answer lies in increased costs in some very specific areas and the exhaustion of some funds that had previously been available to subsidize them. One of our major expenses is the education of our special needs students who require placement in specialized schools. Costs for these schools can range from \$30,000 to \$200,000 a year. For students attending school day only programs, the district must transport the students with costs ranging from \$50 to \$150 per day. The district had accumulated funds in a Special Education Revolving Fund and beginning three years ago; this fund was used to help towards these costs. This fund is now exhausted. So, \$900,000 of the \$1.7 million will go towards out-of-district special needs children. Maintenance and utility costs add another \$600,000 to the total. Although the price of oil has cooperated this winter, it is already going up and we have to budget conservatively for next year. Our electricity costs have doubled as our last three year contract has expired. Finally, our bus contract expires this year and we are anticipating an increase of \$125,000 in this area. The override number does not include raises for teachers and other staff members although it does include the normal salary increase for educational advancement and length of service. That, in a nutshell, is where the money would go. It would mean no staff cuts and a level of service equal to this year.

So what would happen if we do not get this funding and have to live on a budget that is \$1.7 million less than needed? First, it is important for you to know that since 2001, the school district's budget has been essentially level funded. This has resulted in staff cuts every year since then. This means that it is impossible to find \$1.7 million in savings in the budget without affecting the classroom. The administration and I have looked at many scenarios and they all include closing a school. There is no way to achieve savings in staff at every level, maintenance, and utilities without closing a school. This will result in changes in grade alignment in the remaining schools and a dramatic increase in class size. My estimate is that elementary class sizes would rise from the current 21-24 to 26 to 29, with corresponding increases at the middle school and the high school. There would also be losses in every program area including Fine Arts and Athletics. Also of concern is the Rogers Middle School building project. It might prove difficult to get state funding for an additional 50 state of the art classrooms in a new school when the town had twenty classrooms or more lying empty in a closed building.

As Superintendent, I have been gratified by the support for the school system from all sectors of the town and our need for funding could not have come at a worse time considering the economy. However, I believe a strong school system can drive the revitalization of Rockland and I am committed to working with town government towards this goal. If anyone has any questions about this column, please do not hesitate to contact me at 781-878-3893.