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Budget Increase Unavoidable for Elementary School

by Michael Bielawski

HARDWICK — With the state having used a lot of one-time funds last year for its education spending, every school in Vermont is facing the challenge of mitigating an education fund shortfall this year.

That includes Hardwick Elementary School (HES). Estimates for the shortfall in the state's education fund vary from $50 to $80 million.

HES School Board chair Jennifer Fliegelman said that the board is looking at an increase in the tax rate for this year, even though expenditures overall are relatively flat from last year. It is still early to estimate the required increase, as other details are still up in the air at this point. The spending per student is expected to remain mostly flat.

"The budget they gave us was kind of a wish-list of everything they want," she said. "There were some things that didn't really seem necessary, some extra tech support, [for example].".

On the tech issue, Fliegelman said there was concern among board members who don't want to see a lot of screen time for students in the younger grades. She said the bigger issue was the need for larger computers in some of the upper-grade classrooms that are like next-generation smart boards; some board members feel they are unnecessary.

The budget looks to stay under the state's equalized pupil spending threshold; that number is looking to come in around $17,000. This will also be within the state-recommended 2.5 percent increase.

"Equalized pupil" is a term for a weighted student count based on the resources necessary to teach each student. For example, older students and students from a poverty background get a higher weight, than younger students or those from a wealthier family.

The board asked the central office to come up with a low-end budget with a reasonable tax rate that doesn't include huge cuts.

"I think that's where the community wants us to be," Fliegelman said. "We're not really in a position to make more cuts. We've cut a lot of staff over the last several years and we really can't cut any more staff."

There was also discussion about the Central Office budget, which is now being called the "cooperative spending" budget to help people understand that much of that budget pays for services for each participating school. This includes special education, transportation, payroll, and all of the para-professionals.

The central office is looking to hire an administrative assistant and install an electronic time-clock system to reduce payroll work hours. In both cases, the board and other school boards in the supervisory union (SU) are strongly scrutinizing any new central office spending, considering their own budget challenges.

The central office budget will be a topic of discussion by the executive board and SU board at Wolcott Elementary this Thursday evening.

There was some frustration at the meeting about the pace at which infrastructure projects are progressing. There was a successful parking lot project that everyone is happy with, but the new entrance was not finished by the start of the school year.

There were some doors that were supposed to be replaced, and windows have not been replaced on time, either. The new ramp leading to the entrance probably will not be completed until sometime next year.

photo by Vanessa Fournier

Members of the Green Mountain Technology and Career Center Forestry and Electrical programs raised an 1,100 gallon stainless steel sap tank last week from Forestry's 1982 sugarhouse, located behind Hazen Union. A new GMTCC sugarhouse is being built by The Forestry & Land Management Building, located on the Hazen campus.

Fire Department Hit With Big Jump in Dispatching Cost

by Will Walters

WALDEN — The select board agreed to a $6,000 increase in the fire department's budget at its November 22 meeting and will send it to Town Meeting for the public to have a say. The increased amount is in response to an unexpected increase in dispatching costs.

The board has been developing the budget and will hold a budget work session at its next regular meeting. The board still has only two members, as Richard Degreenia resigned a few months ago. Roger Fox said the board is having a hard time finding a replacement and noted that when he resigned from the board 30 years ago, it took two years to fill the vacancy.

Two Better Roads Grant applications were approved and signed — one for drainage improvements on Davidson Road and one for a culvert replacement on Cabot Road. The board discussed the Municipal Road Permit, a new item that is required by the state to allow towns to work on public roads. The permits identify work that is required by the state to be done to improve storm water drainage so that silt and other particulates are not carried by the water to streams that feed rivers. It is part of the attempt to stop pollution from silt entering Lake Champlain, a requirement by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Annegret Pollard brought up Noyestar Road and its condition over the previous weekend. She said the road was slippery then and for a week before. The board discussed the road's wetness from a daytime thaw, which changes to slick conditions at night.

The board talked about the quality of the sand the road crew is spreading and how the sand pile is getting low. Coarser sand was considered the best answer to the slick conditions. The board is developing a plan for sand for future years as the current supply is running out.

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photo by Doug McClure

A 13-axle flatbed truck en route from Tulsa, Oklahoma to St. John, New Brunswick, brings traffic to a stop in downtown Hardwick. The shipment, industrial machinery for an oil refinery in Canada, is one of several deliveries routed through Hardwick.

Students Discuss Futures, Finances, and Options at Sanders' Town Hall

by Doug McClure

MORRISTOWN — Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and a panel hosted a town hall on December 4, with over 60 students, parents, faculty and staff of Peoples Academy.

The panel included Vermont Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe, the Vermont Commissioner of Labor Lyndsay Kurrle, Judy Bourbeau of the state's Apprenticeship Program, Tricia Gates of Vermont State Colleges, John Manoleehs of the Lamoille Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), Kristin Boehm and Marilyn Cargill of the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC), and Ron Elliott of the Smugglers' Notch Distillery.

The conversation was wide-ranging and included discussion on financial aid, options for students looking to enter a trade, college credits, and more.

Sanders did a lot more listening than talking; sometimes, what he heard was concerning to him. In others, he said it was somewhat encouraging. He got an unvarnished take on what these high school students were thinking on the biggest question on their minds: "What next?"

"None of us is sixteen or seventeen," said Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT). "You," pointing at the crowd, "you are the experts."

He later added "What we need to know today is what you know, and what we can do to make sure you know what you need to."

Judging by the audience's awareness and comments, winners among the many programs offered by Vermont were the Upward Bound program, the Governor's Institutes, and dual enrollment. Most of the students had heard of these programs and many had taken advantage of the opportunities offered under them.

Upward Bound

Upward Bound dominated the early dialogue.

Student Nate Belanger spoke first, saying Upward Bound had taught him a lot about college opportunities. Tenth-grader Bryce Noel added that "Upward Bound is teaching us not only how to pay for college, but also what to look for in a college so we can be more proficient in our career search. So, even if we don't go to college ... we know what we're looking for and what employers are looking for."

Upward Bound is part of the federal government's TRIO program. TRIO features eight programs, not all of which are active in Vermont.

Upward Bound specifically targets first-generation college students whose parents did not go to college and is intended for lower-income families.

One female student was upset she was not eligible for Upward Bound because her mother had gone to college, to which Sanders brought up the other TRIO programs.

Many students raised concerns about the cost of college.

"How many of you feel comfortable that you actually can find out the information you need as to how you can get financial aid?" asked Sanders. "Show of hands."

Not a single hand went up.

Cargill of VSAC brought up a raft of programs, saying "there are a lot of opportunities."

She cited a College Pathways event at Saint Michaels, Castleton, and Johnson State College (JSC). She also brought up "Paying for College Nights" at high schools and added that many of these opportunities apply not just to college, but also to trade programs. She gave out VSAC's number (888-9-43-7301) as yet another step for any student with questions.

Few hands went up in the audience when asked if they knew of these programs, and fewer still went up when asked who had taken part in them.

Many of the students were not aware that an expensive college is not necessarily out of reach; one student had concerns about applying to Cornell, until she found out it was actually less expensive because, unlike a cheaper college, Cornell has an endowment that it can use to help fund her education.

"You should not necessarily be intimidated about applying for a college even it's expensive, because if you get accepted they will help you figure out a way," Sanders said.

Dual Enrollment

Another program many students were aware of is Vermont's dual enrollment. Juniors and seniors in

See OPTIONS, 4

photo by Doug McClure

Tenth-grader Bryce Noel describes his experience with the U.S Department of Education's Upward Bound program. Upward Bound helps students with their pre-college academic performance.

In Sports

New Challenges for Trojans

Cabot Girls Look To Keep 2017 Records

Craftsbury Chargers Have Holes to Fill

Hardwick a Transit Point for Over-sized Truck Cargo

by Ray Small

HARDWICK — Traffic on South Main Street came to a halt on Monday with the arrival of a huge truck carrying an over-sized piece of machinery.

The 13-axle flatbed, which is owned and operated by Precision Specialized Division, Inc. (PSD) in Woodbridge, Ontario, was accompanied by pilot cars and several sheriff's patrol cars, which blocked traffic to allow the monster truck to navigate the right-hand turn from South Main Street onto Mill Street and continue east on Route 15.

According to Ed Bernard, Vice President at PSD, the truck was en route from a location near Tulsa, Oklahoma to St. John, New Brunswick, carrying large industrial components.

A sheriff's deputy reported that the shipment was being sent to "an oil refinery in Canada." The Gazette is waiting for confirmation that the final destination is the Irving Oil Refinery in St. John.

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photo by Vanessa Fournier

Employees from Tri State Well Drilling drilled exploratory water wells last week in the town of Hardwick's sand pit off Billings Road. No water source was located.

Towns Draw Line in The Sand

by Will Walters and Doug McClure

HARDWICK — Area towns have policies for public use of town sand during the winter, although so far this year there have not been a lot of occasions to use it. Times may change. Overall, most towns follow the principle of "better safe than slippery" with small differences among them.

Hardwick

Hardwick's 2003 Policy for Non-municipal Use of the Town Sand Pile states "Prior to any removal of sand from the Town sand pile on Creamery Street by a private citizen, it must be authorized by the Public Works Supervisor or the Town Manager. The Town will not provide sand for commercial use."

Cabot

Road Commissioner Karen Deasy said there is a pile of sand for public use outside the gates of the town garage on South Walden Road, so it can be picked up any time of day. She said small amounts are available and business owners can get some themselves to do sidewalks in front of their business. No one is allowed to fill up their truck beds with municipal sand.

Calais

Calais lets any resident or taxpayer of the town get a few buckets of sand at the town garage and, according to Highway Operations Manager Toby Talbot, businesses can also take sand, although he again mentioned "buckets" as the amount. The sand is inside the gates at the garage, so people must get there during working hours, Monday through Thursday between 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. and on Friday 7 a.m. and 11 a.m.

Craftsbury

Bruce Urie says that "sand is available for use by town taxpayers in a small pile near the large sand pile (there are signs). Insurance company concerns make it imperative the general public uses the small pile for their own safety."

Danville

Danville allows taxpayers to take sand from the town's pile, but there is no separate amount put aside so people will have to go there when the road crew is at the garage. The crew's hours are 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., but may be different during storms. Town Clerk Wendy Somers said people are free to take a couple of buckets.

East Montpelier

East Montpelier not only has a policy, it has one in writing. It is available on the town's website under documents and then at the bottom of ordinances and policies. The town's position is "In the interests of public safety, the Town allows very limited removal, for private personal use only, of small amounts from the Town's salt and sand piles by town residents. Over the course of a winter season, the loading of material into a few small, 5-gallon pails or similar containers by shovels is allowed." The policy has some restrictions, according to Town Administrator Bruce Johnson, such as large withdrawals or using commercial equipment. The prohibitions are summarized as "the removal of any material for any use

See SAND, 9

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