

SCHOOL BOARD REPORT

While the School Board works hard every year to craft a budget that provides for a quality education in a fiscally responsible manner, this year was particularly challenging. Two factors mandated tough decisions by the Board. First, declining enrollment at the Plainfield School prompted the Board to recommend adjusting staffing levels to reflect the reality that we have 40 fewer students this year than we did three years ago. Second, the bleak economic situation caused the Board to scrutinize the budget even more carefully than usual, looking for additional ways to reduce spending without impacting educational quality. The net result is that the Board is proposing a 2009-10 school budget that reduces spending by \$136,320. This equals a 2.45% reduction in expenditures, and a 2.38% cut in projected local property taxes. While this represents some welcome tax relief, even with these reductions the District's per-pupil costs continue to rise, which is an issue the Board must continue to address in the coming years.

Declining Enrollment at PES

The Plainfield School District and the community of Plainfield face a significant challenge. Over the past three years, enrollment has steadily decreased. In the late 1990s and into 2005 - 06, the school maintained an average enrollment of approximately 300 students. Over the next two years, however, enrollment declined by approximately ten students per year. This year the drop was more dramatic: 22 students fewer than in 2007-08.

The Board is cognizant of and concerned about the rising, per-pupil-costs associated with our declining enrollment. To understand whether we were facing a temporary dip or a more sustained downward trend, the Board directed our new superintendent, Noelle Vitt, to conduct a more thorough enrollment study. The result is a projection that clearly suggests a continued and significant drop in enrollment over the next three to five years.

School Year	Total K-8 Enrollment
2005-2006	302
2006-2007	293
2007-2008	281
2008-2009	259
Projected 2009-2010	248
Projected 2010-2011	236
Projected 2011-2012	222
Projected 2012-2013	218

Our school has 40 fewer children enrolled today than it did only three years ago, and our staffing levels need to reflect this reality. In the proposed budget for the 2009-10 school year, the School Board is calling for elimination of 1.5 educational assistants, a reading teacher position, and replacement of a full-time science teacher with a two-thirds (.625) position in the middle school. The Board anticipates reducing additional teaching positions over the following two years. Some of that reduction may be addressed through natural attrition such as retirement. A three-year approach allows the administration, along with the teachers and the greater community, to make carefully thought out

strategic decisions about necessary changes, as well as to continually evaluate and adjust these changes as true enrollment numbers become available.

Main Budget

In addition to the cost savings realized by the proposed reduction in staffing levels, the Board also made further reductions to the budget over the course of the past few months in recognition of both the tough economic times and the fact that per-pupil costs, even with staffing reductions, continue to rise. The Board further cut or reduced expenditures in the areas where we felt savings could be found without significant impact to educational quality, including phone system upgrades, reduced replacement computers, arts enrichment coordinator stipend, athletic director hours, hours for summer technical support, library books and field trips, social worker time, and a proposed dishwasher for the lunch program. Finally, the District was fortunate this year to see a significant reduction in special education costs.

Offsetting these decreases are increases attributable to contractual pay increases for the staff, increased high school tuition costs, small increases in the health/dental premiums, increased costs for operation of the building, and a modest investment in hardware and software.

As we did last year, we continue to aggressively and successfully reduce our school building's energy usage. That effort has resulted in a modest (rather than enormous) increase in this part of the total proposed budget. With the guidance, research, monitoring, and hard work of our Facilities Committee (in concert with students and staff), the electricity and fuel oil bills are offsetting price increases. For the future, the Facilities Committee has proposed a long-term, classroom-environment improvement plan that eventually upgrades the entire school. The plan is to improve one classroom this year to learn what the most cost-effective way is to improve heating and ventilation. For more information about this long-term plan, see the School Facilities Committee Report in this Town Report.

Warrant Articles

Special Education Van: Plainfield pays approximately \$36,000 a year to a transportation company to bus student(s) with special needs. With a one-time, \$10,800 extra expenditure over this budgeted amount, we can purchase a van and provide our own driver, insurance, and maintenance. In the following year, our cost to provide this transportation would drop to \$7,500, and the school would both recoup the van purchase and save considerable tax payer dollars.

Prototype Classroom: On the recommendation of the Facilities Committee, the Board proposes a \$25,000 warrant article for money to outfit a prototype classroom with an innovative new heating/ventilation system and renovated exterior to provide energy savings and a better learning environment. This prototype addresses inevitable upgrades to our aging heating and ventilation system as well as necessary repairs to the building's envelope. If successful, and adopted school-wide, over time this renovation would have the added benefit of reducing our annual heating bill – up to 50% by some estimates.

Transfers to Trust Funds: The Board recommends adding \$30,000 to our Building Maintenance Reserve Fund, \$30,000 to our Special Education and High School Tuition

Fund and \$15,000 to the Benefits Payable Fund. The additions would be funded with transfers from any available year end budget surplus.

Senate Bill 2

The last article on this year's warrant is a repeat from last year -- a petition to replace our current structure of traditional "town meeting" style of school governance with what is known as the "SB 2" or "Senate Bill 2" form of town governance. The School Board unanimously opposes the adoption of SB 2. Our opposition is grounded in both practical and philosophical considerations.

Under SB2, deliberation and voting at school district meeting is replaced with a two-part format: A deliberative session followed about a month later by all-day ballot voting on town election day. During the deliberative session, a majority of voters present at the meeting – whether that is 5 voters, 50 or 300 -- can vote to amend the budget and other warrant articles to determine what will be voted up or down on election day. The result is that a small number of people attending the deliberative session can make significant changes to the school budget and warrant articles -- forcing the town to vote on the agenda of a minority of voters rather than the budget developed and recommended by the School Board. To the extent that the deliberative sessions are poorly attended, the people voting on election day may not have a clear understanding of the budget and warrant articles — both the arguments in favor and against — and the quality of the collective decision making can suffer.

From a more philosophical standpoint, we believe that School District meeting is a critical part of the fabric of our town and community. We are fortunate to live in a town with high voter participation, where people care, and are willing to take the time once or twice a year to gather with their fellow townspeople to listen to the presentations and discuss and deliberate the issues to reach an informed and collective decision about what is best for our community. The School Board is concerned that the typical low turnout at the SB 2 deliberative sessions undermines this collective conversation.

Respectfully submitted,

Carin G. Reynolds
Chair