Please support the School Budget

This year, the Board of Education and its new Superintendent, collaborated with the Boards of Finance and Selectmen, to deliver a more transparent and "affordable" budget. The result is a $76.7 million budget. This 5.54% increase supports school excellence as defined by the District Priorities with the lowest increase in a decade.

To build understanding and support we enhanced transparency. Budgeting began in October with BOE approved District Priorities. The Superintendent used these to develop a detailed budget. We held half a dozen budget workshops, two public hearings, and meetings with PTAs and the Rotary. Budget discussions were more intensive. Answers to questions begat more questions until there were 152 posted to the web site for all to review. For example, transparency was enhanced by adding an explicit Excess Cost Reimbursement forecast.

Collaboration was key. In a major departure from past practice, the BOE, BOS and BOF met twice to review town finances. This permitted Ridgefield to rise above the typical budget battles. A November meeting defined the town's fiscal capacity and provided a critical budget input. After the February meeting, the BOE dug deep and reduced Energy Cost estimates $200,000 to close an identified affordability gap.

The BOF approved a BOE suggestion to use a million dollars of fund balance to attain a 3.53% mill rate increase. The BOE collaborated to provide about 90% of this from Educational Cost Sharing Grants and Excess Cost Reimbursements returned to the town.

We tightened our belts on operating costs as much as possible to provide funds for school maintenance. Ridgefield has a million square feet of schools whose replacement cost is $350 million. A systematic plan for replacing or repairing – 40 year old boilers, asbestos tile, windows, roofs and cracked pools – saves money and avoids the unfunded surprises which come with the unplanned replacement of failed items. Fortunately, some of these costs are eligible for State reimbursement. This work requires about a $1.25 million a year over the next five years.

While the above focuses on the bottom line, the BOE is committed to supporting school excellence. This budget achieves that goal by addressing the 2008-09 district priorities. Initiatives costing money include: covering soaring energy costs; providing enhanced security; reducing reliance on athletic fees; adding 2.5 math paras to improve math skills; staffing mandated nurses; expanding the High School technology program; updating the student data management system; completing high school accreditation; and implementing mandated in-school suspension. These initiatives were offset by budget reductions in curriculum writing and books; equipment leases; staff reductions due to lower enrollment; and assertive budget projections.

With upfront transparency and collaboration, after detailed reviews, both the BOF and BOS approved sending the proposed BOE operating and capital budgets to the voters as is.

Times are tough and voters demand their elected officials mind the store. This work had been done. The BOE, BOS and BOF have vetted and approved the BOE budgets, and we now respectfully request your approval of this work.

Keith Miller
Chair Ridgefield BOE