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Town officials: What's Plan B? Ask for school panel's next step if override fails

BY TRACY SEELYE
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20, 2011 03:32 PM

Whitman-Hanson Regional School District officials have received some good news in their effort to balance the fiscal 2012 school budget from the district's legislators on Beacon Hill regarding Chapter 70 aid to education.

House members in Boston have endorsed Gov. Patrick's January figure of \$24,464,624 for that funding.

But Whitman town officials and department heads at the Wednesday, April 13 meeting did not seem to come away with the news they wanted to hear after voicing their concerns about the school district's portion of the Proposition 2 1/2 override being sought in both towns.

"As a department head, I need to know what the School Committee's plan is should the override fail," said Whitman Fire Chief Tim Grenno. "I can't support an override, as it stands right now, when I don't know what the impact on my budget is going to be."

He said the department heads' understanding is that the override is seeking a 4 percent increase in the towns' assessments and would mean the schools must level-fund if the override fails. Grenno said people in town are asking for his opinion on the issue and how it would affect his department. "If you tell us tonight its 4 percent with the override and zero without, we're good to go," Grenno said. "If you tell us tonight it's 4 percent and 3 percent if it doesn't pass, we have some numbers to run and figure things out."

Whitman Town Administrator Frank Lynam said his understanding is that his town is going to ask voters to support an override to support the regional schools, other town departments and several other divisions of the town in critical financial times.

"But the only way we're going to survive this budget cycle the way it's going to be presented is with that override," Lynam said. "Otherwise our default plan is going back to — once again — no raises, level-funding and reducing some budgets. In which case we would support no increase for Whitman-Hanson. We just need to know if we are on the same page."

The School Committee stressed they could not plan that way. "As a school committee, our charge is to establish an assessment and that's it," committee member Jim Tuffo said. "It's plain numbers. We don't know how to fund it, if it will be funded. ... In my mind, I simply voted for an assessment." Committee Chairman Robert Hayes agreed with Tuffo's approach.

"If you're not going to support it — and I think that's where it lies until we get to a vote — we have to come back to a meeting and decide what to do," Hayes said. "There are options." Hayes said if an override is rejected, the school committee could stay with it, to shrink it to zero — it can't go any higher — or seek a super Town Meeting.

"One has to be done before we can get to the other," Hayes said.

Grenno stressed that, as a department head whose budget had to be approved by the Finance Committee a month ago, he

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needs to know the direction in which the School Committee is going.

"It's not us against you," Grenno said. "I need to know which direction the School Committee is going to vote to persuade the towns."

Committee member Susan McSweeney said it is vital to go into the override with a positive mindset — not to plan on its failure. "We have to look at this uncertainty in a positive way," Superintendent Dr. Ruth Gilbert-Whitner said. "I wish we could tell you what's going to happen, but we don't know. I know that's difficult but we've got to be in it together. Good schools need good towns and good towns need good schools."

The good news on the state front was that both state Rep. Geoffrey Diehl, R-Whitman, and state Rep. Daniel Webster, R-Hanson, have apprised the district that the House version at Chapter 70 aid to schools will be at the same level as quoted to by Gov. Deval Patrick in January.

"That is extremely good news," said Gilbert-Whitner. "Before we were looking at a potential 3.5 percent cut. That still does not mean that that is our real Chapter 70 money for 2012, but it is certainly encouraging to see that the number is set, so that number we've been giving you since the end of January is the same Chapter 70 number — \$24,464,624 — we've been working with."

It still leaves a budget gap of \$1.6 million with no increase in the operating assessment to schools. She said a worst-case scenario could see the schools short by \$2.4 million if Chapter 70 aid is cut.

"I am at least encouraged that it's not cut," Gilbert-Whitner said. "We had been hearing that that was what was going to happen and that would be absolutely devastating to us."

The district still has to wait and see what the state senate does. In the meantime, the district is looking to how it delivers services such as bus transportation and custodial work to trim costs.

Gilbert-Whitner's office has proceeded with an investigation into outsourcing custodial and light maintenance services and there were tours by interested companies. More information is expected by the end of April.

But first the committee was updated on where the current budget stands.

"We knew this year's budget was going to be very tight," said Gilbert-Whitner.

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