

# Two towns continue to block passage of Quabbin budget

**I**t's time to pull out the rewind machine once again.

On track to where the Quabbin Regional School District seems to almost be making a habit of it, the district is again in the midst of a struggle in having enough of its member communities sign off on their respective allocations that are to make up the fiscal 2012 budget. One need only look back to late October 2009 to see the last time the district dragged the process out well beyond the finish line.

So then it could hardly be seen as a shock when the district's budget for fiscal 2012 went down once again at the hands of the voters of one too many towns on Aug. 11.

Considering that both New Braintree and Oakham had turned down the previous funding request on their respective Town Meeting floors back in June, when the budget then stood at \$30,286,861 before being reduced down to \$30,270,641, a scant \$16,220 having been lopped off — or slightly less than a half of one percent cut — the ensuing votes for the two towns' Special Town Meetings went down pretty much as expected.

When the "savings" could amount to \$894 for one town, after it had asked the budget be cut by \$40,000 (which would have been a cut of 4.44 percent from the

most recent budget proposal), while the other was only slightly better, at a deduction of \$1,943, after it had asked for a cut of \$60,000 (which would amount to a 4 percent cut), it's hard to imagine that either town would have had its residents pounding down the door to flip their votes in favor of the budget.

Needing just one of the two towns to support it, as the larger communities of Barre, Hardwick and Hubbardston had already signed off on it, maybe school officials were hoping that any cut would sway just enough votes, or simply hope that enough of those who had voted "no" on the first vote wouldn't come out the second time.

The first shot to passing the budget was in Oakham on Aug. 3, but town officials, likely frustrated at how little was lopped off, only presented the budget by having residents vote for the previous number that had been approved a couple months earlier at the Annual Town Meeting.

When it was time for New Braintree to put it up for a vote, again Quabbin school officials were left disappointed, in that town officials there made sure that a budget number wasn't even put up for a vote, with residents left to turn down the slightly reduced budget number that had been approved by the School Committee on June 29.

With the dust settling on that double whammy, the district is left to try to find a way to get one of two towns to approve a budget, with the prospect of the state stepping in by Dec. 1 if that doesn't happen. Quabbin superintendent Dr. Maureen Marshall, though, was in Hubbardston Wednesday night, and voiced little concern at that prospect, along with no desire to comply with either New Braintree's or Oakham's demands for cuts to the budget.

## EVOLVING EDUCATION



**ANDRES  
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"If we agreed to what New Braintree requested, we would have to cut \$800,000 from the budget...That is never going to happen," said Dr. Marshall.

Them's fighting words.

But before one assumes that all shreds of compromise have disappeared off the face of the Earth with the well-publicized recently played out antics by the Tea Party in Washington, D.C., for instance, this space is convinced that even a

modicum of effort to find some middle ground to cut the budget, could get at least one of the two dissenting towns to support the budget with the other three towns that have done so.

And we're talking at cutting a little deeper than the paper cut of \$16,200 to accomplish that.

While it's easy to spell out that the cuts requested by New Braintree and Oakham seem like peanuts, being that they are by far the two smallest communities represented in the Quabbin district, and therefore a proportional cut spread across the other three districts would add up to significantly more, up to \$800,000, according to the superintendent, here's thinking that the frustrated antics exhibited on the Special Town Meeting floors this month would likely not have occurred, if instead of presenting such a miniscule cut to the two towns, maybe the simplest line item on the budget ready to be eliminated, would be the planned addition of the assistant superintendent position, which adds \$118,000 to budget line.

And that subtraction actually leaves the district right where it leaves it.

In the same position as last year, as the position wasn't part of the budget then.

Wouldn't it be nice? Absolutely. But in an environment where "shared sacrifice" is

thrown around for all sorts conversations, to where the president of the United States is questioned about the wisdom of taking a trip to Martha's Vineyard, it's clear for the need to pay attention to current state of the economy, and that this simply isn't a time to add to a budget, with there being a strong need to do one's best to get as close to "level services."

Therefore, I do find it debatable that in the view of Dr. Marshall, as she stated at Wednesday's meeting, that the state commissioner of education will simply sign off on the budget, noting that "....I am not worried about the Commissioner's comments about our budget." Especially with so little of a cut having been made on the last round, presented to the two towns that had dissented on the first round.

While the superintendent might want to claim that the district is in the bottom 10 percent in all areas of per pupil expenditures, Quabbin hardly stands with a number of districts that end up funding their district right to the state mandated line of "net school spending." For Quabbin, the district was required to spend \$26,022,671 for fiscal 2010, and it spent \$27,662,240, more than \$1.6 million above what the state was mandating. And as mentioned last week, 22 districts in the state that year couldn't even meet the

mandate. For fiscal 2011, Quabbin's required number actually dropped — likely because of its continued drop in student population, to \$25,229,057, while the district ended up spending \$29,401,458, more than \$4.1 million above what the state had mandated for a minimum.

And before one might want to think that school districts in the region don't use the state "net school spending" as a measuring stick for how much to budget for the schools each year, as Gardner's budget of \$25,174,670 for fiscal 2010 was only \$95,557 above what the state had mandated for minimum spending — barely a third of one percent of that district's budget. Winchendon wasn't much better, at slightly under a quarter million above the required funding for 2010, so Quabbin's funding hardly can be equated to scratching at the bottom of the barrel.

In addition, while Dr. Marshall spent time Wednesday focusing on how much the three larger towns in the district have been impacted by earlier cuts to this budget — news flash — that's happening in practically everywhere across the state, and probably across the country.

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