

Will impending deadline lead to action on Quabbin budget?

It's hard not to lose track of the details behind this year's Quabbin Regional School District budget fight — especially since similar situations seem to occur on an annual basis, with the particulars ultimately beginning to blend together.

Standing at the forefront of resistance when confronting the yet-to-be-approved Quabbin budget are two of the district's smaller member towns: New Braintree and Oakham.

How small?

In a second round of town meetings on the budget held this week in four communities, the district's latest funding request failed thanks to just 130 residents between New Braintree and Oakham.

Talk about democracy showcased on an extremely powerful scale.

All it would have taken was for just nine of the voters during New Braintree's town meeting Monday to flip and support the allocation, and Oakham's vote would have been moot. If not, then just six Oakham voters on Wednesday could have hedged and supported the desired Quabbin allocation, and either would have put an end to this year's drama and signed off on what was an estimated \$31.4 million school budget for fiscal year 2013.

As troubled as the towns seem to be about the district's

increased assessments over last year, Quabbin Director of Administrative Services Cheryl Duval pointed to other concerns as to why the request for an additional \$128,620 in allocations from the two towns was rejected.

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"From what (Superintendent Dr. Maureen) Marshall said, it is to get the towns working together, and that there were no comments talking about the district's budget," said Duval. "They want to talk to the (state) education commissioner, about giving the district more Chapter 71 funds (for transportation) and that they were having an issue with unfunded mandates."

New Braintree Selectman Martin Goulet, though, took issue with Duval's view.

"Unfunded mandates are everywhere you look, we are powerless over those ... that's not the issue," he said "The issue is with Quabbin and that it has an unprecedented amount of money

at its disposal, from state and federal sources, but they assess well above the (state mandated) minimum. We are willing to (pay above the mandated minimum), and always have."

Oakham Board of Selectmen Chairman Dennis Bergin, though, seemed to take issue with Duval's claim that the numbers weren't a focus, but then outlined many of the same concerns dealing with state funding.

"We don't have a problem with the (budget) process, but with the numbers," he said. "We have definitely had us and the school department speak on those issues (on state funding), and we are definitely in agreement that something has to happen on the state level. The best the state has ever done (for transportation reimbursement) is 60 percent, and it was supposed to be 100 percent, and it's killing us."

Given the fact that the school district will be going into its third round seeking budget approval, Duval said, "Given the results from Oakham and the New Braintree, where the Finance Committee and the selectmen were involved, we don't think they will move on another round on the district budget."

Goulet seemed to concur, when he said, "We've drawn our lines in the sand, and we aren't going to give in, we are not going to go along with you, or the

school committee, and they won't go along with us."

While Hardwick approved the budget on Monday, New Braintree gave it the thumbs down, leaving Quabbin to pin its hopes on having both Oakham and Hubbardston approving the reduced school district budget number Wednesday, so to meet the threshold of having four towns approve the budget.

Hubbardston came through, paired with Hardwick and Barre earlier, on a budget that included approximately \$600,000 in cuts. Added to that was \$386,000 in additional state funding detailed last month, resulting in an overall lowering of assessments to the district's five towns by nearly \$1 million.

Looking back, the district seems to have learned from the debacle of last year's \$16,220 in "cuts" to its initial budget. This year's proposal has already shrunk from a preliminary request of \$32,965,683 down to \$32.02 million — which was labeled a "level services" budget — before arriving at the most recent \$31.4 million figure.

Nonetheless, Bergin said, "That is true (cuts have already been made to the school budget), but our issue is that the school should live under the same constraints that the town does. That 2.5-percent constraint translates to a \$54,000 (increase). Yes, state aid has been cut, but we have to

take it out of (funding for) the town departments, to where they are as low as they can go, and there's not much more that we can cut."

With only three of the five towns so far blessing the budget, the district again will have another 30 days to determine what cuts could satisfy officials in New Braintree or Oakham.

If the Quabbin School Committee decides on any more cuts during its next meeting Sept. 13, the three communities that have already agreed to their allocations would see them reduced proportionally, if either New Braintree or Oakham in the end decide to approve the budget on the third try.

With the school year having already begun throughout central Massachusetts, this third round will be running up against a quickly approaching deadline, during which the district will be forced to operate under "one-twelfth" budgets. If the deadline is reached, the state steps in and the Department of Revenue determines the budget for the rest of the fiscal year.

Bergin voiced a slightly encouraged tone that an agreement might be possible before the bell tolls.

"We have still one more (round), as the school has to go back within 30 days, to decide whether there are more cuts," said Bergin. "We have still more

time until Dec. 1, before the state makes their final decision, and hopefully we can come to some agreement by then."

The prospect of the state coming in, though, didn't seem to concern the New Braintree selectman.

"I welcome the commissioner to come in and look at how (the district is) spending the money, and how they are claiming poverty," said Goulet. "Look at how they are spending school choice funds ... there is no budget problem here."

Consider that the requested allocation for New Braintree for fiscal 2013 is \$953,689, and that the town level funded its assessment from fiscal 2012 at \$913,523. The difference is \$40,166.

Is the fight worth it for that amount of money?

To Goulet, "\$40,000 represents all our new growth, so any new needs that New Braintree has, that's what the school district wants. Every \$10,000 is spoken for, as our needs are so overdue, and we've deferred our spending for so long. The last time we bought a new highway truck, that was 10 years ago, as we can't buy new vehicles anymore."

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