

Notes from the Board Table  
April 4, 2016  
by Bruce Likly  
Chairman, Wilton Board of Education

Thank you very much to everyone who took the time to attend last Monday's Board of Finance hearing about the proposed education budget. It was wonderful to see so many seats filled in the Middlebrook auditorium, and to have person after person take the microphone and speak in support of our schools. According to my notes, of the 37 people who spoke, 31 expressed support for our budget.

I believe the people of Wilton delivered an unmistakable message to our Board of Finance and other elected officials: We support our schools and we must continue to invest in them.

The next step in the budget process takes place this Wednesday, when the Board of Finance decides whether to accept the education budget as proposed, or to force us to make further cuts. The Board of Finance's deliberations will take place this Wednesday, April 6 at 7:30pm in Town Hall, Room B. The meeting is open to the public, and I hope supporters will attend. The more we can reinforce our community's strong support for our schools, the better chance we have of convincing the Board of Finance not to reduce our budget.

I've had people ask me what I think is going to happen. My honest answer? I have no idea.

Board of Finance Chairman Jeff Rutishauser explained in last week's hearing that the town faces an unpleasant economic reality this year. The Grand List has shown weak growth. Debt obligations from the Comstock and Miller-Driscoll building projects are a factor. And our realtors are telling us that people are opting not to move to Wilton, often because they think our taxes are too high. As Chairman Rutishauser explained, the town faces a shortfall of \$2.6 million that must be addressed, either by cutting budgets, raising taxes or a combination of the two.

I am very sympathetic to this dilemma. The Board of Finance truly has a tough job to do, and I am grateful to each member of that Board for their time and commitment to our town. But as I have stated repeatedly, care must be taken not to harm our town's primary asset, our schools. As one resident so eloquently put it in a letter: "Cuts to the Board of Education budget will risk making Wilton a town with higher taxes and mediocre schools, something we all truly can not afford."

At \$80 million, the school system is by far the largest part of our town's budget. This makes it vulnerable, and a constant source of criticism from people who believe there simply "has to be" waste and inefficiency in a budget of that size. "Fire some administrators," is a frequent demand. "Why so many teachers?," "Why is the special education budget so high?," and one that really drives me crazy, "Let's get rid

of ice hockey because the costs are exorbitant.” Not realizing of course, that the reason ice hockey costs are so high is because the town rejected a proposal a few years ago to build our own ice rink, and now we have to pay other towns to use theirs.

- Our budget requests a 1.27 percent increase in spending. This is despite a contractually mandated 3 percent increase in teacher salaries.
- Our budget reduces headcount by 6.65 personnel. This includes classroom teachers, paraprofessionals and central office staff.
- Our budget makes critical investments in assisting students as we continue to transition to the Common Core aligned Math in Focus curriculum. The budget will ensure that each of our schools has in place a full-time math interventionist to help get students back on track.
- Our budget includes funding for a new STEM course at Wilton High School, the first step in introducing to our schools the nationally recognized *Project Lead the Way*. The budget also includes a “Technology Help Desk” course, which will allow students to develop their passions for technology.
- Our budget continues to invest in technology infrastructure, as we work to build a network that has the bandwidth to keep pace with our continually growing needs.
- Our budget makes investments – albeit small ones – in enrichment and gifted education. Many parents believe the needs of our highest achievers have been overlooked in recent years, and in many ways they are right. Programs funded by this budget will ensure that every student receives rigorous instruction commensurate with their capabilities.
- Our budget is quite lean, all the fat has already been scraped away. I worry that any reduction would be a step backward in the important investments and progress we have made in recent years.

To all of you who took the time to attend last week’s meeting, who stood at the microphone to share your thoughts, or who wrote a letter in support of the school budget, please know you sent a very important message. We’ll know in the coming days if that message was heard.