

Letter: School Official encourages feedback to City Council on FY2012 budget concerns

To the Editor:

The Gloucester School Committee, along with our newly appointed superintendent Dr. Richard Safier, and over 85 concerned members of the school community, attended the FY2012 Budget City Council public hearing on May 31st, 2011.

In excess of twenty five concerned parents, community members, principals, administration and teachers voiced their support of the committee's proposed FY2012 budget to the City Council requesting that they not require the School Committee to make additional cuts. Mayor Kirk's proposed budget for the schools is approximately 2 million dollars below what is required to provide a level service budget for our 3200 students.

In March, Mayor Kirk requested that our committee present a budget to her office that was level funded. On April 22, 2011, after a rigorous and transparent budget process that began in December with the entire administrative team, our committee submitted a responsible budget for \$33,961,538, or \$278,865 above level funding. To date, our presented budget includes reductions of 42 positions and other expenses totaling \$1,501,917, including anticipated unemployment costs.

On May 10, 2011, the Mayor's school budget submitted to the City Council for FY2012 was for \$33,332,673 or an additional cut of \$350,000 below level funding. It remains the Mayor's intention to allow the school department to benefit from school employee health insurance savings which are currently ongoing and if successful could reduce approximately \$282,818 of our \$722,721 shortfall. This shortfall has recently been increased to include a Title 1 funding cut of 15% or \$94,478.

Our May 12th school budget presentation to the Council's B and F committee along with the most recent budget update of May 25th can be viewed at www.gloucesterschools.com

FY2012 budget challenges facing the city and our school district have included the loss of our \$890,000 ARRA grant, which has funded personnel and other special education expenses for two years, a \$585,000 loss in Chapter 70 aid that will be diverted to the Gloucester Community Arts Charter School in FY2012, and a reduction in state local aid.

In the FY12 budget planning process, our school committee agreed to quality of education goals:

- Continue to provide quality academic programming and staffing
- Maintain optimal class sizes
- Encourage clustering of students to maximize specialized staff
- Retain adequate Assistant Principal/Guidance Counselor support in our three grade level house system at O'Maley to support children during their most challenging years
- Maintain after school tutorial/support programs for at-risk student population

- Avoid increases to athletic and bus fees
- Make school lunch program self sustaining to avoid reliance on school budget

This coming fiscal year is among the most financially challenging our school community has faced. The City Council will need to make difficult decisions in the next several weeks.

If the Council is not successful in finding solutions to help us bridge our budget shortfall, our committee will be faced with making further cuts. They will be voting on the fiscal FY2012 final budget at a Special City Council meeting on June 21, 2011. **Public comments on educational priorities can be sent to members of the City Council at the email addresses/phone numbers noted below.**

Even as the School Committee focuses on the financial difficulties of the next 12 months, we continue to build our schools for the future. On May 25, 2011, we unanimously voted to approve the purchase of the evidence-based Pearson Literacy Reading Series for East Gloucester, Beeman and West Parish elementary schools, similar to materials offered via our partnership with the Bay State Reading Institute at Beeman and Veteran's Memorial Schools.

This timely purchase was made possible by cost savings efforts initiated by our leadership team with the goal of implementing this reading program in the fall. We are confident that this differentiated education and innovative literacy initiative will help all of Gloucester's K-5 students in narrowing the achievement gap while simultaneously providing additional literacy rigor for our more advanced learners.

In spite of our budget challenges, our students and teachers are engaged in their work, and our community partners and parents continue to fundraise and volunteer to help us offer innovative programs and initiatives.

Thanks for your continued support of our school district.

Val Gilman
 Gloucester School Committee Chairperson
 75 Revere Street
 Gloucester, MA

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<u>Councilors at Large</u>	<u>Email</u>	<u>Phone</u>
Joe Ciolino	weather.vane@verizon.net	978-283-6559
Sefatia Romeo Theken V.P.	sefigiam62@aol.com	978-283-1527
Bruce Tobey	btobey@gloucester-ma.gov	978-282-0001
Robert Whynott	rwhynott@gloucester-ma.gov	978-283-8230
<u>Ward Councilors</u>		
Paul McGeary	pmcgeary@gmail.com	978-283-8425

Ann Mulcahey
Steve Curcuru
Jackie Hardy President
Greg Verga

acmulcahey@comcast.net
scurcuru@gloucester-ma.gov
jackieahardy@verizon.net
greg@gregverga.com

978-836-2557
978-281-1845
978-283-4858
978-283-0730