

A Public Service Newsletter Dedicated to Keeping the Citizens of Wilbraham Informed About Important Matters.

Wilbraham to Face Tough Choices

From The Board of Directors,
Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham

There is an old saying that is very appropriate for the leadership of Wilbraham: *“When the going gets tough, the tough gets going”*.

The leadership of Wilbraham have to face some tough choices in this year’s budget cycle. Whether that be the Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee or the School Committee, each group faces the same tough decisions. Their choices will impact the financial status for years to come. Consider the following 4 issues:



1. **Unfunded Liabilities:**

Healthcare costs for active and retired town employees has exploded over the last twelve years from \$352,000 in FY 1998 to a projected \$1,280,000 in 2009 or a 335% increase. This unfunded liability, unless curtailed by program changes, will seriously impact the town’s ability to operate successfully.

In May of 2006 the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham submitted Article # 3 and it was passed at the Annual Town meeting. This Article asked the Board of Selectmen to

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Here’s the Latest on Minnechaug and MSBA...

By Robert L. Page Jr., *Chairman CCW*

The newest thing on the “Minnechaug Project” is that our School Committee, at the recommendation of Dr. Gagliarducci, has authorized a \$15,000 expenditure to hire Ruotolo Associates, Inc. of Andover, MA. According to their website, Ruotolo is “a full service fundraising and public relations firm for the non-profit world” and have four locations. We have been reliably informed, that this is to be thought of as a “Communications Initiative”. We have been also told that the goal is to aid in better informing our two towns about our project.

We have been reading and hearing from several people that feel that this could just be a waste of money. Their point is this: This is not a very complicated issue. Just give us **all** the facts. Explain to us what it’s going to cost and for how long. Tell us if it’s to be a new school or renovate the old one. How much is the State going to chip in? Show us some pictures. Finally, let us ask questions and get answers about any concerns we have. Etc., etc.

We have been assured that this money is not going to be used to “sell this project”. We’ll just have to wait and see if that is the case.

We recently inquired of the MSBA and have been informed

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SAVE THE DATE!

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING MAY 12TH

The Annual Town Meeting is set for May 12, 2008 at 7:00 pm and will be held in the MRHS auditorium. All of the spending and guidance for the Town will take place at this meeting. Be sure to mark your calendars and attend.

It Doesn't Belong to the Town!

By Allan Kinney, Vice Chairman of CCW and Director

Fountain Park is owned by the *Wilbraham Nature and Cultural Center, Inc.*! It is not owned by our town. It was owned only for a "moment in time" by Wilbraham. Here is the story.

In the early 1990's, in the Town of Wilbraham there was a strong community effort to get the State to give us the Pheasant Farm land. The State informed us that they no longer gave away properties like the Pheasant Farm.

Gale Candaras, who was then our State Rep, worked closely with Speaker of the House, Thomas Finneran, to have legislation written whereby the Town could buy the Pheasant Farm.

The Town didn't have the \$300,000 laying around to buy the property. The *Wilbraham Nature and Cultural Center, Inc.* came forward with a proposal.

Laurence and Carol Fountain pledged to provide the \$300,000 for the purchase of the farm. The State would sell the property to our town, the Fountains would pay for the property and finally the Town would deed the property to the Wilbraham Nature and Cultural Center, Inc. to be overseen by their Trustees.

Laurence and Carol Fountain, for their generosity, asked only that the park be called "Fountain Park". The State placed several restrictions on this 144 acre transaction. Two of those restrictions are that it must be a public park and that the 99.13 acre portion facing Soule Road must remain in it's natural state.

So now when your grandchildren ask you about the Fountain Park, you can tell them the real story. It's a public park owned by a private group.

Please feel free to invite your neighbors and friends to our next CCW Meeting. It's open to everyone and we encourage comments and feedback of all kind!

Schools Brace for Lean Times

By Nancy Zuckerbrod, Associated Press

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WASHINGTON - School budgets have seemed to defy gravity in recent years - going up steadily without ever coming down. But school board members from across the country say that's likely to change soon, and they're bracing for leaner times forced by the nation's economic downturn.

Board members in Washington last week for an annual conference said shortfalls in state budgets coupled with pessimistic predictions about local - revenues are forcing them to look for ways to trim next year's budgets, which they are working on now.

About half of the states are facing projected budget shortfalls, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington-based research group.

The downturn in the housing market has led to a drop in state revenue from sales taxes associated with construction materials, furniture and other goods, said Liz McNicoll, senior fellow at the center. She said recent job losses around the country also could lead to a reduction in income taxes collected by states.

At the same time, economists predict local revenues will drop over the next few years as real estate values decline, generating less local property taxes for school budgets.

Board members from Virginia to Alaska attending the National School Boards Association's legislative conference said they were considering rolling back benefits to school employees, reducing staff and limiting tutoring and extracurricular activities available to students.

Among the most worried, were board members from California, where Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed more than \$4 billion in cuts to schools.

"It would decimate education as it exists right, now," said Paul Chatman, a school board member from Ocean View, California.

Chatman said some, of the district's new teachers, who aren't protected by seniority rules, will lose their jobs, even if the governor's cuts are scaled back as expected.

"It's unavoidable," he said glumly.

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Eagle Eye News is a bi-monthly public service newsletter published by Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, a taxpayer watchdog group dedicated to keeping Wilbraham citizens informed about important matters. Articles may be submitted for consideration, but are printed at the sole discretion of the editor and may be edited if too long. All submissions must be signed by the author.

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Candidates' Night Set for April 17th

The Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham will again be sponsoring "Candidates Night" at next month's CCW meeting on April 17, 2008, at 7:00 pm at the Wilbraham Middle School on Stony Hill Road.

We would strongly encourage you to start thinking about the questions you would like to ask the candidates.

As is our custom, each candidate will be allowed to introduce him or herself with a 4 minute presentation. When all have had an opportunity to speak, we will invite questions from the audience. *CCW neither endorses or opposes candidates running for office. Our objective is to provide a forum for citizens to meet the candidates and ask questions.*

This year, terms will end for 9 offices and their offices will be up for election: Selectman, Board of Assessors, 2 Regional School Members, Cemetery Commissioner, Water Commissioner, Library Trustee, Planning Board Member, and Housing Authority Member.

This has always been a very well attended meeting and everyone has a wonderful time. Do yourself a big favor. Come on out and look the candidates over and meet them in person.



Schedule of Upcoming Meetings

Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham at Wilbraham Middle School, Thursday

- March 20, 2008, 7:00 pm
- April 17, 2008, 7:00 pm
- May 22, 2008, 7:00 pm

Board of Selectmen at Town Hall, Selectmen's Meeting Room, Monday

- March 17, 2008, 7:00 pm
- March 24, 2008, 7:00 pm
- March 31, 2008, 7:00 pm
- April 7, 2008, 7:00 pm
- April 14, 2008, 7:00 pm
- April 21, 2008, 7:00 pm

Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School Committee, Tuesday

- March 25, 2008, Wilbraham Middle Sch
- April 8, 2008, Thornton Burgess MS
- April 22, 2008, Memorial School
- May 13, 2008, Thornton Burgess MS

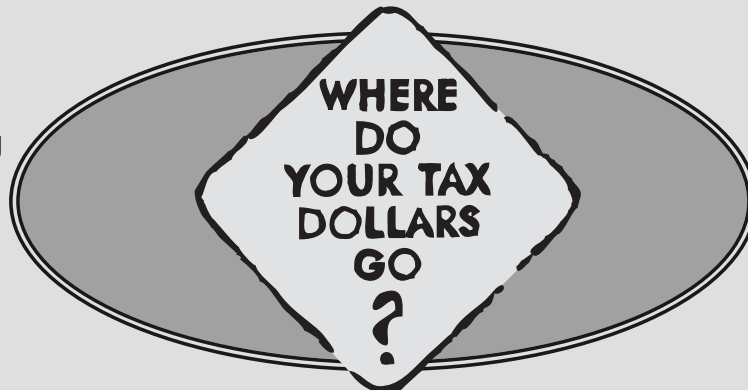
Get Involved - Your Opinion Matters

Do You Care Where Your Wilbraham Tax Dollars Go?

If YES, then attend the Annual Town Meeting on May 12 and voice your opinion (if you wish) and vote what you want, and what you believe is in the best interests of your town.

If NO, then you can stay home, and read the results in the newspapers about how others voted for you.

Annual Town Meeting
May 12 at 7:00 pm
MRHS Auditorium



The choice is yours. You decide.

THIS THING FEELS LIKE A BRIBE

By Robert L. Page Jr., *Citizen of Wilbraham*

State Rep. Ruth Balser of Newton Massachusetts has drafted a bill number "H.2840" that proposes a Proposition 2 ½ Senior Override Exclusion.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Let's just think this through.

Here are the particulars: You must be age 65 or older, have an annual income no greater than \$60,000 and a property tax that exceeds 10% of your income.

Here are a list of problems with this Bill:

1. The goal of this Bill, as publically admitted by the Bill's sponsors, is to get Seniors to stay home and not vote.
2. This Bill is designed to marginalize Seniors and their votes.
3. It is specifically designed to lure Seniors into a false sense of security.
4. This Bill is just a reassignment of who pays your override tax bill. You or someone else.
5. In my opinion this Bill is about making it easier to pass Proposition 2 ½ overrides.
6. Finally, this Bill would be a bookkeeping nightmare. Just ask our Town Treasurer what he thinks.

This Bill is a shameless example of self-serving legislation. Representative Balser came up with this idea to help the Mayor of Newton pass a \$200 million override for a "Taj Mahal" high school.

It's not property tax reform as its cover story purports. This Bill tries to lure us into accepting tax relief so our younger friends and neighbors can pay our share.

If an override is worthy and the public is informed, it will pass on its own. Just don't try to maneuver us into staying home and not voting. OK?

Tough Choices from Page 1

investigate, study and report back to the town on the impact of the unfunded future costs for retiree health and life insurance.

Nearly two years later, the citizens of Wilbraham are still waiting for a response. We anticipate that the final projection will be breathtaking and difficult to fund. *See chart page 6!*

2. Employment Contracts:

Presently, employment contracts are being negotiated with teachers, municipal, firemen and police unions. We must continue to negotiate and bargain in good faith. That bargaining must not result in agreements that cannot be sustained (paid for) by the town tax revenues. Moderation needs to be exercised by all involved to ensure the ongoing quality of our town services and educational systems.

3. Future Revenue Growth:

In recent years new town growth has been unprecedented and has contributed substantially to the tax dollars collected. Growth in our community is slowing, and new town revenues contributed by that growth are dwindling. Revenues will more than likely continue to grow at the mandated 2 ½ % limit. We believe the attitude of the taxpayers to pass overrides is not supportive and passage is highly unlikely.

4. Facility Improvements:

The choice to repair or replace various facilities such as schools, fire department, police headquarters, library, etc., will dramatically increase taxes. With so many uncertainties in our economy, combined with future mandated costs, we must minimize non-emergency expenditures. We don't mean stop maintaining these facilities or delaying approved and funded capital projects, but to curb our appetite for new unnecessary items. *Living within our means* in this area will pay dividends in the future.

No doubt the "Going is tough" and now it's time for the "Tough to get going". We think the tax paying citizens of Wilbraham would like to see an aggressive approach toward all our vulnerabilities. Let's avoid distractions and focus on the critical business at hand.

Late Breaking News...

On March 11, 2008, CCW representatives attended a School Committee meeting at the Thornton Burgess Middle School. The HWRSD budget increase for the coming fiscal year is only 3.77% above the previous year.

In addition, the Wilbraham assessment was held to 2.49% increase above the previous year. Special thanks and congratulations to School Superintendent Dr. Gagliarducci and the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School Committee for passing a fiscally responsible budget. WELL DONE. And thanks for ---

Living Within Our Means!



Lean Times for Schools from Page 2

Other desirable school programs are on the chopping block as 'well'. Chatman said efforts to reduce class sizes will probably be slashed. A block scheduling program, in which students study subjects for longer periods, may be scrapped altogether because it relies on extra teachers to make it work.

A projected shortfall in Minnesota's budget also has education officials there worried, said Jackie Magnuson, a school board member from the Minneapolis suburb of Rosemount.

She said school districts around the state would likely try to persuade voters to approve increased taxes for school funding, but she said those kind of ballot initiatives wouldn't pass easily.

"They're not going to be in any real particular hurry to run and help support the schools and pay for increased taxes for you, even if they'd like to, because, they're already up to their eyeballs (in bills)," she said.

Minnesota and California state governments heavily fund local schools. Nationally, about 47 percent of money for schools comes from state governments, 44 percent from local taxes and 9 percent from the federal government.

Even wealthy school districts are feeling the pinch.

In the booming northern Virginia county of Fairfax, school officials are contemplating cuts such as requiring students to pick up their own tabs for Advanced Placement tests.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT *More Is Never Enough*

State tax revenues will grow below 4 percent next fiscal year, to \$20.987 billion, Patrick administration officials and lawmakers agreed recently.

Budget writers have predicted a structural deficit next year well north of \$1 billion, much of the gap created by spending pressures that are outpacing revenue growth.

The off-budget commitment for the Metropolitan Boston Transit Authority (MBTA) would hit \$768 million, a \$12 million increase over the set-aside for the current fiscal year. The School Building Assistance account would receive \$702 million, nearly \$70 million over this year. Pension transfers are marked for \$1.465 billion, a \$66 million increase, but with no changes to funding schedules. That would leave the amount of tax revenue available for the fiscal 2009 budget at \$18.052 billion.

Let's hope that the politicians don't try to help Wilbraham balance our budget.



**Want to join Concerned
Citizens of Wilbraham?
Do you know someone who
might be interested? It's a
great way to stay in touch on
important matters in town.**

**There are no dues. Give us a call at 596-8719.
It's your town. We'd love to have you!**

Latest on MRHS and MSBA from Page 1

that our School Building Committee and Project Manager have **not** been approved by the MSBA. They are looking for more information on the process that was used in our selection for a Project Manager. We were previously told that the MSBA had given the HWRSD the go ahead with a Project Manager.

A question comes to mind. We were told in the January 10th issue of the Wilbraham-Hampden Times that approval was given to move ahead with retaining a Project Manager. However in a communication with the MSBA on March 7th, they informed us (CCW) approval for a Project Manager has **not** been given.

We have additionally learned that several of the State's school districts have had multiple meetings with the MSBA. Minnechaug is not one of them.

Here is a direct quote from the MSBA that you may find helpful in understanding the process a little more:

"Some districts, although not many, have had multiple meetings with us but this does not mean that they are farther along than Minnechaug. Each Project is district specific and some projects have necessitated more than one meeting. Now, some projects that are classified as "Project Scope" have been making rapid progress (i.e. Hingham) but they were always farther along than other communities since they moved forward with their projects during the moratorium. Hingham is 1 of 7 communities that made significant progress during the moratorium."

Additionally we were told, *"We are currently reviewing Minnechaug's feasibility study that was conducted a few years back and it is likely that it will need to be enhanced. The selection of such a feasibility update firm would be chosen by the MSBA's Designer Selection Panel. The cost of such a study will be shared with the MSBA at a predetermined percentage."*

One thing that may have slowed down things to some degree is that in middle of January, Executive Director, Katherine Craven had a son, her 4th child, and she, as of 3 weeks ago, is back at work.

We hoped that, after three and a half months of finding ourselves on the premier MSBA list, we would be further along than we are. We can only trust that we will have a great deal more to report in our next issue.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

We'd love to hear what you think about our newsletter and website. If you have any comments or suggestions, call Bob Page 596-8719 or email us: Editor@ConcernedCitizensofWilbraham.com

Wilbraham Municipal Group Health and Pension Benefits 12 Year History*

The information below has been compiled to demonstrate the fearsome, out of control growth of the health care benefits and pension benefits that are provided to

our municipal employees. These same growth patterns also prevail in our School District. A solution needs to be found to control these unsustainable increases.

Fiscal Year	Health Care Costs	Dollar Increase	Percent Growth	Pension Benefit Costs	Dollar Increase	Percent Growth
1997	\$ 335,163			\$ 379,110		
1998	\$ 351,855	\$ 16,692	5%	\$ 368,292	\$ (10,818)	-3%
1999	\$ 396,260	\$ 44,405	13%	\$ 500,605	\$ 132,313	36%
2000	\$ 414,245	\$ 17,985	5%	\$ 532,230	\$ 31,625	6%
2001	\$ 503,394	\$ 89,149	22%	\$ 549,725	\$ 17,495	3%
2002	\$ 574,722	\$ 71,328	14%	\$ 563,577	\$ 13,852	3%
2003	\$ 667,416	\$ 92,694	16%	\$ 695,677	\$ 132,100	23%
2004	\$ 698,216	\$ 30,800	5%	\$ 781,387	\$ 85,710	12%
2005	\$ 778,156	\$ 79,940	11%	\$ 729,487	\$ (51,900)	-7%
2006	\$ 892,136	\$ 113,980	15%	\$ 867,813	\$ 138,326	19%
2007	\$ 961,699	\$ 69,563	8%	\$ 1,005,715	\$ 137,902	16%
2008	\$ 1,103,200	\$ 141,501	15%	\$ 1,069,215	\$ 63,500	6%
2009	\$ 1,180,379	\$ 77,179	7%	\$ 1,130,785	\$ 61,570	6%
AVERAGE ANNUAL INCREASE			11.2%	10.1%		

* Source: Wilbraham Annual Town Reports
and Town Administrator Reports

Compiled by Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham

2/18/08