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Easthampton schools face \$300,000 shortfall

By CATHERINE BAUM
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EASTHAMPTON - School officials have prepared for a \$300,000 shortfall in the current fiscal year with anticipated cuts in utilities, revolving accounts and supplies.

The School Department, which makes up about 65 percent of the city budget, is set to take on a comparable percentage in the city's \$560,000 budget shortfall this fiscal year. Anticipated revenue fell short due to fewer new car sales than planned for, Mayor Michael A. Tautznik said. The city budgeted \$1.4 million in automobile excise taxes or 4.4 percent of the total FY2009 \$32 million budget.

"I think our economy is driven by consumer confidence," Tautznik said. "The way we keep it going is if people keep buying stuff."

Andy Paquette, the school business manager who evaluates the \$15.3 million school budget, presented a revised financial plan in light of the shortfall to the School Committee Thursday evening.

"The good news is we did it," said Paquette. "The bad news is we did it."

The largest chunk cut from the budget is a \$100,000 cut in utilities. The money will be taken from a surplus in heat and electricity funds over the past three years.

Money taken from what are known as revolving accounts will contribute another \$100,000 to the shortfall. That money comes from special education tuition payments and special education funds set aside for the preschool program.

"The sped accounts are used as a rainy day fund," Superintendent of Schools Deborah Carter said. "You never know when you'll get a tuition you're not expecting. We haven't overspent that money for good reason."

The remaining \$100,000 will come from funds for supplies and texts, maintenance and to a lesser extent, technology, Carter told the committee.

Fortunately, school officials are not anticipating any staffing cuts this year.

"To get rid of staff in the middle of the year is a domino effect," Carter said.

These cost-cutting measures in the School Department will be presented at the mayor's Dec. 29 meeting with department heads.

Peter Gunn, of the School Committee, noted the \$300,000 mid-year cut is a short-term plan, and asked Paquette about long-term strategic planning. "We have the skeleton of a scenario based on mid-year cuts," Paquette said.

The department has adjusted for known contracts, known fee increases and reductions in grants. That said, layoffs and other cuts are expected in the FY2010 budget. "Nobody's immune to this at all," Carter said. "This is reality."

Student Representative Eric Frary said students have expressed concerns about increased class



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