

Easthampton schools say pared budget OK

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EASTHAMPTON – Though it's a smaller amount than what they had hoped for, School Committee members, parents and teachers are pressing the City Council to approve Mayor Michael A. Tautznik's proposed \$15.3 million school budget for the next fiscal year.

That number, which was announced at the panel's Thursday evening meeting, is a 2.6 percent increase from the school's current \$15 million budget.

"As a mother, a taxpayer, a teacher and a volunteer, I want to urge you to keep the number," Katy Berube, of 35 Bayberry Drive, said to the panel during public comment time Thursday. "It's so important that we keep our city strong through the education of its kids."

Kim Stillwell, speech pathologist at Maple Elementary School, said she urges the City Council not to take the number lower as it would result in fewer teachers and larger class sizes.

The committee originally requested a higher budget increase from the city. Last month they proposed a 6.3 percent increase - about \$953,000 - for next year, but, given rising costs like health insurance, Tautznik predicted the city would only be able to fund the department an increase ranging from \$200,000 to \$400,000. At Thursday's meeting Tautznik confirmed the increase would be on the higher end.

"Getting close to the \$400,000 makes it less painful," Deborah Carter, schools superintendent, said in an interview before the meeting Thursday.

She added that the department has put together a "sound educational plan" based on that figure.

"We will have some loss of positions and services, but we've done that so we can make the best use of the staff we do have," Carter said. "I'm optimistic that we can move forward productively with that figure even though it is short of what we need."

Tentative reductions include \$17,000 in medical and therapeutical services and \$206,000 in the elimination of seven positions - four paraprofessional positions at the middle school, one special education teacher, one elementary school teacher and one middle school teacher. Carter said the eliminations are through attrition, as a number of people are retiring and some people will be moved or have their jobs reorganized.

"I still feel like we're a lot better off than communities around us," Chairman Thomas Brown said. "The sky is not falling, Easthampton."

Still included in the pared-down budget are, at the high school, \$14,500 for a library paraprofessional, \$22,500 for a half-time social studies teacher and \$2,000 for Saturday detention supervision; \$8,000 for the elementary schools' after-school enrichment program; \$8,000 for after-school busing at the middle school; and \$5,000 for technology stipends and supervision at the middle and elementary schools.

The committee proposes that the high school receive the most money because it has the fastest-growing enrollment rate. According to the February 2008 high school enrollment report, there are 129 more students there today than two years ago.

The City Council will formally receive the city's fiscal 2009 budget Wednesday, and vote on it in early June, Tautznik said.

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