

Southampton board presses budget cuts

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER

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SOUTHAMPTON - The town's \$13.1 million budget, which was already \$221,000 out of balance when it was approved at the annual Town Meeting in June, will be cut by an additional \$91,772, Southampton's share of the 2007-08 Hampshire Regional High School budget.

On Tuesday night, the Board of Selectmen decided to send a memo to department heads asking them to send a proposed amount they can cut from their budgets by the morning of Oct. 2, when the next meeting will be held.

"The budget - expenses and revenues - has to be balanced," said Jess Dods, chairman of the Board of Selectmen.

"That requires making budget cuts."

The town is expecting about \$162,000 in free cash, which can be applied to the deficit, but selectmen advise against doing so because when a budget is built using free cash in operations, the sources of free cash disappear.

"I would like to hold free cash," said Michael Phelan, selectmen vice chairman. "If not, we're digging the hole deeper."

The free cash amount, however, is not certain until it is certified by the state.

"These numbers are all fluid and flexible," Dods said.

The Edwards Library, Larrabee Building and Town Hall are subject to consideration for budget cuts, selectmen said.

"It makes no financial sense to have all three buildings," Phelan said.

"They're expensive."

Southampton is the third fastest-growing community in the Pioneer Valley, out of 43 cities and towns.

The town's population grew by more than 30 percent between 1990 and 2005.

Department heads are concerned about having adequate budgets, and taxpayers are concerned about large increases in taxes, according to Dods.

"There always will be that difference in opinion," Dods said.

"It's not frankly as dramatic as it may seem. There's always going to be more demand than there is supply in any municipality."

A special meeting will be held in mid-October, prior to setting the tax rate, when the town will vote on recommendations made by the Finance Committee and Board of Selectmen. Recommendations will be based on the committee and board's conversations with department heads.

"We've got to collectively think about what we're going to do for the good of the town," said Douglas Blanchard, selectman.

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