

GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Superintendent's Corner

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As the new Congress takes up its mantle, one is reminded of how much impact national and state governments have on each of us. While the arguments are often pitched as Republican verses Democrat, conservative verses liberal, or whatever other labels are being used, it seems that discussion is often aimed at winning the next election rather than on reaching a compromise that is in the best interest of the average American. Everything might be a little easier if government revenue was growing by leaps and bounds (without raising our taxes of course) as funding is frequently the fly in the ointment.

This also applies to our state government, which closed out their session in December without making the needed changes to school funding that they've studied, discussed, and even drafted legislation around. It seems that every group is pushing for changes in funding from the state—schools, unions, towns, cities, business organizations, and even charities—but the bottom line is that while we all want, and perhaps even need, additional funding, no one is particularly interested in paying more in sales taxes, property taxes, income taxes or any type of user fees. So it seems as though some things never change and the old saying that the squeaky wheel gets the grease is as relevant today as it was in the days of the horse and buggy (just consider the money spent on, and by, lobbyists).

Coupled with the propensity of legislators to create solutions to problems through legislation that doesn't include the funding for local municipalities and schools to implement (unfunded mandates), we're left with locally determining how to best meet all of the increasing regulations with no corresponding increase in state or federal aid. What this means is that many of our own local priorities are often unable to be acted on because of the lack of time or revenue.

This has often been a bone of contention between local towns and school systems given the need to maintain services, improve opportunities, and solve capital issues with a limited tax base. One only has to look at the increasing percentage of the school budgets currently paid for by towns that is often directly tied to the decreasing percentage of school budgets paid for by the state and federal governments. Tie this to the lack of the state fulfilling its' promises (100% regional school transportation reimbursement, paying the fair value of state lands through the PILOT program, and not adjusting formulas based upon the actual costs of providing services) and it's no wonder that annual budgets are so difficult to approve. As a simple example, if the cost of services (town or school) rises 3% due to inflationary pressures, but state aid doesn't increase (and it made up 50% of the expenses in the prior year), then the increased costs to the schools or towns is essentially doubled by that amount.

Thus in the past we've seen minor increases in the school budget of 2% equal an increase in overall town assessments by double digits thereby historically resulting in significant cuts in the schools. The most shocking example was between 2003 and 2005 when the state cut educational aid and the town assessments still went up despite local educational cuts of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even when state aid has gone up slightly, the statutory method of assessing towns based strictly on population meant that some towns' assessments went down while others increased significantly.

Hopefully last year's work by town and school officials to develop an alternative assessment method that resulted in everyone's assessments increasing by the same percentage will again be approved at local town meetings to avoid the huge swing in assessments of the past. We're also hopeful that there will be changes in educational funding, as well as increased funding for the PILOT program, that will help keep the increases in local budgets realistic in terms of the limitations in our tax base. As town and school officials continue to work collaboratively on budgets, and advocate together for appropriate state funding, it will be important for others to also advocate for these items with their state legislators, as it doesn't seem that we'll get any grease under the current system without making our squeaky wheels heard.

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