Superintendent’s Corner

January 3, 2020

Although the school committee and administration have been presenting information about the FY’21 budget in joint budget meetings with town officials, we are now moving into the specifics of the budget and town assessments. As we’ve done in the past, the presentations shared with town officials are also posted to the district’s website (www.grsd.org) so students, parents, and community members can follow the budget process to have a better understanding of the budget when annual town meetings begin in the spring. While we started presenting the budget online last year using ClearGov, we’ve moved even further into sharing the details with our constituents this year. To that end, the draft budget for the next school year is now online and can be viewed on the website www.cleargov.com, entering Gateway Regional School District and then clicking on ‘Expenditures’. This will bring you to the location of the most current information on the proposed budget and information on the past five years for comparison purposes.

As a reminder, the district’s budget process begins in early fall with administrators working with their staff to determine needs for the following year. These needs are then translated into funding requests and put together into building and area-based budgets (i.e., the two elementary schools, the middle school, the high school, special education and district costs). Each administrator then meets with the superintendent and business manager to review their requests, justify their needs, and demonstrate how this meets the needs of their students. This is also the point at which district expenses such as insurance, utilities, retirement, custodial and maintenance budgets are developed.

This provides a basic outline of the expenditure side of the budget that is then put together into an overall budget to be shared with the school committee and town officials during joint budget meetings. The reasoning behind the requests is shared over these meetings during the fall (again, these presentations can be found online). The preliminary draft line item budget is then developed and shared with the public at the first school committee meeting in January. This is a draft expenditure budget for several reasons, including the fact that we’re still waiting for definitive figures for some expenses (i.e., health insurance costs) and considering the support for the budget from the school committee and town officials. After reviewing the expenditure budget, we wait for the preliminary revenue numbers from the state that are usually first seen in the House One Budget (Governor’s Budget) in mid to late January that allows us to put together the draft town assessments. The actual town assessments will continue to be modified as we finalize the student census on March 1, as required by law, and wait for more specific budget numbers from the state. Experience has shown that final state numbers are usually available between early June and July as the state finally agrees and approves the state budget.

As you can see, this means that we are essentially forced to use estimates of revenue, often not getting final numbers until after our member towns have completed their annual town meetings. The entire process is dictated by state law, including the number of days before the first town meeting that the budget must be given to the towns. Once the towns approve the budget their assessments cannot go up (but can be lowered based upon increased revenue from the state).
without another town meeting. Thus, if the state actually lowers revenue the district is forced to make up the difference (as we do not go back to towns for increases once the budget is approved).

To add to the confusion, the state has approved an alternative to the statutory method of determining town assessments. This alternative method essentially raises each town assessment by the same percentage rather than account for differences in state aid and student numbers by town which eliminates the dramatic changes in assessment amounts on a year to year basis. The alternative method must be approved by all six member towns while the statutory method only needs to be approved by four of our member towns.

Our hope is that providing detailed information on the budget and development process will assist our communities in making informed decisions regarding the school district.