

Sustainability

The question of sustainability of the budget remains a topic of discussion among community members as we near voting day on June 6th. Sustainability appears to be an umbrella term for many arguments against the budget, and we'd like to address several of them here.

Assertion: Taxes are too high.

Response: This year's budget provides a tax rate decrease of 1.2% for those who pay based on property value and 6.5% for those who pay based on income. This would be the second tax decrease in a row. Taxes would be lowered to levels last seen in the 2014-15 budget.

Assertion: Expenditures are growing too much.

Response: Net expenditures in this budget would grow by 1.69% - less than the current rate of inflation. Total expenditures would grow by \$2,295,185. Revenues from sources other than property tax (reimbursements, grants, tuition income) would grow by \$1,499,854. The net increase of \$795,331 divided by last year's budget of \$46,973,703 is 1.69%. If you compare this budget's proposed draw from the state education fund (funded by property taxes) to last year's (\$37,222,807 FY18 versus \$36,427,476 FY17) the proposed growth is 2.18%.

In other words, the District is asking taxpayers for an additional \$795,331 to continue offering the programming South Burlington families have come to expect, to implement a few important new initiatives, and to serve the growing needs of our student population for special education programming.

Assertion: We can't depend on state or federal funding sources to offset the growth in expenditures.

Response: We do not know if, how, or when federal or state sources of funding will be cut. We've made decisions as a nation and a state that public education will be funded partially through property taxes and partially through other sources of state and federal funding. This framework is not within the District's control, but we do have to operate within it. It is not within our ability to legislate state and federal programs with this single, local school budget. To attempt to cut back programming to the point where we could comply with the minimum requirements of state and federal mandates without using any state or federal funding would be damaging to our children's education and to the health of our state and our nation. If we start to make those kinds of deep cuts before other districts, we put our property values at risk and make ourselves less competitive with other districts. We could also lose some tuition students who help to support our budget and the richness of the programming we can offer to the students of South Burlington.

Assertion: Programming is too rich. Students would do just fine with fewer "extras."

Response: The District is responsible for preparing students for a job market that is ever-evolving. Many of our students will one day work in jobs that haven't even been imagined yet. The economy is also globalizing, meaning that our students will compete and collaborate more directly with people from other parts of the world. Our District has responded by creating a set of Ends that guide our program offerings and our evaluation of our students' progress. As reflected in those Ends, we are working hard to develop flexible, collaborative, life-long learners who are eager to contribute to their communities and society as a whole.

The richness of our programming keeps students engaged with their educations by providing them ways to explore their varied interests. It also gives them multiple different opportunities to engage with their fellow students and their teachers. Those bonds help them feel supported and help them learn what it means to support others as active community members.

Over 90% of South Burlington taxpayers responded in an exit poll in November 2016 that good schools are extremely important to them. When families are asked why they chose South Burlington as a place to live, they consistently cite the excellent school system. The program that the District has developed over the years and continually reviews and adjusts is responsible for the District's consistent ranking as one of the top 5 school systems in the state.

Assertion: Our budget is too high versus other districts in the state.

Response: South Burlington ranks 110th out of 266 districts in terms of spending per equalized pupil (see other posts on this page for a discussion of cost per equalized pupil). Average spending per equalized pupil in FY 2018 budgets across the state has been reported as \$15,380 to South Burlington's \$15,401 – a difference of \$21 per student. As explained in the prior response, the District is providing significant educational value for the money we spend.

Assertion: The governor says all districts should level fund their budgets.

Response: The governor's proposal has not advanced in the legislature. If the District level funds now, we put our programming at greater risk if level funding becomes a reality in the future. As described elsewhere on this page, level funding without concomitant reductions in mandated spending would require cuts to non-mandated programming like advanced courses at the high school, music and art programming at the elementary schools, extra-curricular activities, etc. that help the District provide the education that attracts families to South Burlington and prepares our students for the jobs of the future.

Assertion: The teachers are asking for too much in negotiations.

Response: The school board continues to negotiate in good faith with the South Burlington Educator's Association to try to reach an agreement that meets the needs of all stakeholders – teachers, taxpayers, students. Voting down the budget does not help the board at the bargaining table, whatever the Association is proposing at the moment. Too much attention has been given to the Association's proposal as opposed to the far lower terms proposed by the Board, including 1.6% additional funds toward salaries for FY 2018 (lower than inflation) and an increased teachers' share of health insurance costs over their current share. The board needs the support of the community in order to negotiate the best settlement possible.