

Letters & Opinion

Souhegan Board Attentive To Size of Budget and Cost Per Pupil

To the editor:

The Souhegan board has been attentive to the size of our budget, and the resulting cost per pupil, for some time now. These topics came up again at our Public Hearing on the budget, echoing what we've been discussing with the Advisory Finance Committee throughout the budget development process: the proposed budget, at \$18 million, is very large relative to the perceived decline in student population in town, and the cost-per-pupil is one of the highest in the state. The board is, and has been, very aware of these issues for a number of years, and has been working to address them through the last few budget cycles. While we are all voters and taxpayers, concerned about our taxes, board members are also charged with a duty to make decisions that are carefully thought through to minimize the impact on what makes our school successful, AND meet the needs of the taxpayers to develop an affordable budget.

Souhegan High School got to our current position with 14 years of growth that exceeded all expectations, and lead to quick overcrowding of a brand new building, the need for portables on the lawn for many years, and then the addition of the annex building. Along with growth in numbers, we saw demand for growth in services: more athletics to serve more youth, more advanced courses to meet the needs of high-achieving students who aspire to attend highly selective colleges, more support for students who struggle, so that every child succeeds in achieving a good education without choosing to become a dropout. We met all those challenges, but at a cost. The board proposed budgets each year to meet the challenges we faced, and in all but two years, the voters supported those budgets.

In 2006 the world changed for us. While the demands for programs that meet the needs of all students continue to grow, one element of the budget drivers changed direction, we had hit our peak enrollment at 1046 and the number of students began to decline. The board did not respond im-

mediately to that change, but has been taking measured step since to bring enrollment-based costs back to the design goals. To bring student-teacher, teacher faculty, and support staff ratios our desired target (or better), we have reduced staff by 15. With student enrollment now relatively stable for a few years, we cannot further reduce staff without having undesirable impacts on student learning and services. Similarly, we still have more students than the main building was designed for, so we cannot arbitrarily reduce space usage without overcrowding.

Both the board and administration are well aware of the costs our programs levy on the taxpayers of Amherst and Mont Vernon, and we see the potential for a larger decline in students in a few years if the reduced population in the lower grades of AMS, Clark/Wilkins and the Village School continues. We are preparing for that, as well as examining our programs at a deeper level to determine what we can let go while retaining that which makes us a successful educational institution for all students. We want the voters to know we are all on the same page, and attending to the needs of all residents in a thoughtful way, which is not necessarily the fastest way, but intended to be the most satisfactory way.

*The Souhegan Cooperative School Board
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Souhegan Ranks Highest Among Its Peers in Cost per Student

To the editor:

The Souhegan budget for FY2016 needs to be viewed from a broader perspective than its modest increase over last year as portrayed by the Board and members of the Souhegan Advisory Finance Committee. Evaluating a budget can and should be viewed from its relationship to other schools across the state. The way to look at this is by studying the cost per student which provides an apples to apples comparison to all high schools in the state. You can find this data at the NH Department of Education (DOE) website (<http://education.nh.gov/data/financial.htm#cost>). You will be told by proponents of the Board that these numbers do not provide a proper comparison because they are apples to oranges comparisons. However, if you inspect the root of the comparison, you can make up your own mind. The cost numbers are carefully constructed according to a NH DOE specification called the DOE 25 and you can inspect this at: http://www.education.nh.gov/data/documents/doe_25_fy2013.pdf.

This is a carefully designed specification to get at the operational costs of the running a school. It eliminates items like bond issues, food services where government subsidies cause distortions, and transportation costs as well as other costs that distort the comparison of different schools. The cost of operating the school is divided by the enrollment to create the cost per student that can be used to compare the operational efficiency. Cost per student is a measure of relative efficiency of school's use of taxpayer dollars.

By this measure, Souhegan is ranked #9 in the state with 76 high schools. However, the 8 schools above Souhegan are schools with an average enrollment of 171 students. Studies have shown that the optimal size for a high school is between 600 to 900 students because they can offer a full curriculum at the lowest cost and also offer direct attention to students on the fringes. Larger schools lose the visibility of fringe students and smaller schools lose the economies of scale to create the best value. Souhegan sits in an optimal range to run a high school at an optimal cost, but do they?

The state average for cost per student is \$14,109 and Souhegan is currently at \$19,012 or 34.7% above the average for the state. SAU 39 has defined a peer group that it likes to develop comparisons. These 10 schools were selected because they are considered to be the "best" academic comparisons and/or schools that Souhegan competes with for staff. They include Hollis-Brookline, Windham, Bow, Exeter, Hanover, Bedford, Millford, Merrimack, Con-Val, and Oyster River. In this peer group, Souhegan is the #1. The peer group average cost per student is \$15,344 and Souhegan is 24% above the peer group.

The proposed Souhegan budget for fiscal 2016 of \$18,163,195 (this \$ amount is not the DOE 25 and should not be used for computing cost per student) shows an increase in budget of \$39,693 or .22% increase. By most measures, this is a modest increase and the voters might consider it acceptable, but it deserves closer inspection. One of the key planning assumptions for the Souhegan budget (or any school) for Fiscal 2016 is the projected enrollment. For Fiscal 2015, the enrollment planning assumption was 839. The Fiscal 2016 SAU 39 projection is 815 and was their planning assumption. This is a reduction of 24 students and a 2.9% decline.

Why is enrollment important?

Enrollment drives most of the major expenses incurred in the budget. The amount and number of books, computers, co-curricular activities,

classes, subject offerings, teachers and support staff, etc., is driven by the enrollment. The budget should scale up with increasing enrollment and down with declining enrollment; and they should be somewhat proportionate over time. There are some fixed expenses that are not driven by the enrollment such as the electricity and natural gas; and, these should be excluded costs.

A 2.9% decrease in enrollment should trigger a similar decrease in the budget less the cost of fixed expenses. Instead, the Board is proposing an increase of .22% rather than a decline. Using the decrease in enrollment would place the budget at around \$17,589,803 plus fixed costs as compared to the Warrant Article #1 amount \$18,163,195.

Beyond Fiscal 2016, there is a steady decline in enrollment over 5 years. At the start of 2020, the enrollment projection drops to 632. This is a loss of an additional 183 students resulting in 22% decline in enrollment. This steady decline in enrollment should be addressed in each year that it is incurred. Delaying will cause a much larger disruption in the school than necessary. No forecast is perfect. The enrollment in future years are subject to increasing variability, but the trend is unmistakable.

The Souhegan philosophy of education is a very positive aspect of the school. We have a set of thoughtful educators and by all accounts an outstanding staff. Souhegan is an outstanding school and educators come from long distances to come to see how it works. The citizens of Amherst and Mont Vernon have a great deal to be proud of. The Board should be commended for the FY2014 and FY2015 budgets which reduced the cost per student. However, they chose to reverse course for the FY2016 budget and ignore the downward trend in enrollment. Simply put, the budget should scale with enrollment; when enrollment rises, the costs should rise and when the enrollment declines, the costs should decline. Scaling with enrollment does not impinge on Souhegan's education values or philosophy.

Recently, the Board wrote a letter to the editor titled Planning for Declining Enrollment. This was hardly a plan. It talked about their past successes and nothing about how they are going to meet the challenges of the next five years. We are voting on the FY16 budget in the near future. This Plan for Declining Enrollment does not address the future in FY16 or beyond.

I support the school and the philosophy of education, but I do not support the proposed FY2016 budget.

*David Chen
Amherst*

Concealed Firearms is a Form of Self Defense and Reduces Violent Crimes

To the editor:

I take great exception to the recent letter from Clay Sammis regarding the above. He is certainly entitled to his opinions about the Second Amendment, but he is not entitled to his own facts, particularly those that are so blatantly wrong.

He claims that "30,000 plus Americans are killed with guns every year. This amounts to 85 deaths a day, or more than 3 an hour. Over 20% of those are children or young adults according to the Centers for Disease Control and Protection." I checked the CDC data and could not find anything remotely close to the above claims. However, a better source of gun violence statistics in the United States is available on the FBI website. (www.fbi.gov) and follow the links under "Stats & Services" to Table 20 which has the information on all of the homicides committed in the US in 2013, the latest year available.

There were a total of 14,196 homicides committed and reported to the FBI during that year and of those, 8,236 were committed using a firearm. Further, of the total firearm deaths, 681 were considered "justifiable" by either a law enforcement officer or an armed citizen. The balance was committed using edged weapons, blunt force, or hands, feet or fists. The state

Get Involved or Wake Up With a Pipeline in Amherst

To the editor:

As Amherst is waking up to the real possibility of a high pressure Natural Gas Pipeline in town, many are wondering how this has happened, and what we as a community can do about it.

This pipe line was supposed to go through Northern Ma, however they revolted, as did Hollis, and so now it's in Amherst.

This is a 36in diameter pipe that will be carrying more than a billion cubic feet of gas a day, pressurized to 1,460 pounds per square inch. This is a large pipe line compared to others. Do you want this in Amherst no matter where you live? Montana just had a leak in their pipe line, and the Governor has declared a State of Emergency. This pipeline was also underground as is the one planned for Amherst. The difference is that pipeline was carrying oil not gas. Unfortunately when a pipeline is carrying gas it explodes which leads to loss of life, homes or schools in the area. Kinder Morgan has been sited for having a poor safety record. Kinder Morgan's pipelines have been plagued by leaks and explosions. A Hedge fund has accused the firm of "starving its pipelines of maintenance spending".

Amherst does not have the emergency response required to protect this town from a gas leak or explosion. In the event of a large rupture, the valves on each end of the rupture must be closed, (can be any where from 2.5 miles to 10 miles apart) and after that the gas has to burn off.

The Hollis Selectmen and citizens stood arm and arm through out Hollis to protect their homes, children, real estate values and schools. I hope we stand together and do the same in Amherst. We need our Selectman to send a strong message to those involved, and be actively participating protecting the citizens of Amherst.

Everyone needs to get involved, or you will wake up with a pipeline in your town.

*Alice Bury
Amherst*

Suppliers Trying To Stay Ahead Of The Curve By Avoiding Shortages.

To the editor:

One thing those who oppose the possibility of a new natural gas pipeline coming through N.H. and Amherst fail to understand is that gas is a commodity, and subject to global pricing and distribution. The quantity pricing and distribution and expansion on the local level is subject to review and grants by the Public Utilities Commission.

Presently there are over 2 million miles of gas pipelines in the U.S., enough to encompass the earth over 80 times, plus thousands of miles of lines carrying hazardous liquids. How many accidents have we had with these buried pipes? Very few. On the other hand, how many ships, trucks and railroad containers have lost oil, gas and hazardous liquids over the years? A lot.

Your streets are lined with multi-kilovolt wires crisscrossing the landscape, and high pressure gas lines buried just a few feet down. So why not complain about that? The risk has been minimal. There is no such thing as zero risk in life. Utility companies have been very responsible in minimizing the risk their products pose. The same assuredness should be granted them in burying pipelines to meet our future energy needs. Utility companies have a pretty good track record in that respect. Having spent decades in a technical field, I respect the engineering involved in power distribution.

Listening to some of the opponents of increasing the gas supply, you would think that the energy supplier had nothing better to do than dig up your community and keep heavy equipment operators busy. The suppliers are trying to stay ahead of the curve by avoiding shortages.


All commodities are, as mentioned before, subject to global pricing and distribution. Pipeline opponents, be it natural gas or oil, assume that which is locally derived should only be distributed as such. We import a fair amount of energy products. Shouldn't the same exportation argument be afforded citizens of other energy producing countries? Pose that question to those whose passion is to return us to quill and ink well and the answer is silence.

*Henry Perras
Amherst*

Letters To the editor:

The Amherst Citizen is eager to serve as a community forum. We welcome your letters, opinions, and commentaries and make every effort to run them in their entirety. We do reserve the right to edit. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the position of the staff of *The Amherst Citizen*.

Please direct your letters, views and commentary to the Editor, *The Amherst Citizen*, P.O. Box 291, Amherst, NH 03031-0291, or e-mail your submission to: news@amherstcitizen.com. We will attempt to run your letter as submitted (space permitting) providing it is signed and phone number is included.




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