

## ‘Ayes’ Make Easy Work Of Financial Town Meeting In Lincoln

By MARCIA GREEN  
Valley Breeze Editor

LINCOLN – Nearly 700 residents made short work Monday of adopting a new town budget that’s penny for penny as proposed by Budget Board members and Town Administrator T. Joseph Almond.

Residents had clearly come with a shared workmanlike attitude. They endorsed line items with a series of strong and nearly unanimous “ayes,” then sent themselves home two hours after the first gavel had called the meeting to order.

Support was firm even as leaders made clear that in this economy of lost state revenues, even level-funding means a tax increase come July.

Lincoln’s affirmative action stands in contrast to meetings going on in town halls and schools across Rhode Island where severe budget cuts are triggering citizen arguments and political grand-standing. For Almond and members of the Budget Board, Monday night was a test of residents’ willingness to understand this winter’s budget deliberations then heed a call to show up to vote despite having to endure the tedium that goes with the double-reading of nine lengthy resolutions shrouded in legal language.

A repeat of last year’s underground drive to boost the school budget would have, from Almond’s viewpoint, dropped more money on a School Department already top-heavy with personnel and forced a tax increase beyond the estimated \$120 for homeowners whose houses are valued at \$280,000. Instead, citizens agreed with little comment to level-fund the school department to the point of approving less money than last year when the reduced state aid is figured in. Just a solitary “nay” sounding faintly against hundreds of “ayes.”

Superintendent Georgia Fortunato was publicly supporting the lower number - \$47.2 million compared to last year’s \$48.3 million - and with a wide smile traded thumbs-up gestures with nearby school personnel when the school budget was so effortlessly adopted.

Residents concluded their business by adopting a \$16.6 million municipal budget and were filing from the Lincoln High School auditorium by 9:35 p.m.

Almond told The Breeze the Budget Board accomplished a “tough job” and voters “realized what we were facing.”

“I am really, really pleased with the tremendous show of support,” Almond said.

Moderator Robert Ericson said that by his watch, Monday’s meeting was the fastest in recent memory, beating the 2007 meeting by one minute.

Analyzing the mood later, Ericson said, “They wanted to make sure their taxes didn’t go any higher. People understood why it was like it was. People understood and they wanted to make sure it didn’t get out of hand.”

He said he sensed a tension in the room that was ready to erupt had an attempt been made to alter the plan.

Ericson credited the team of Almond and Finance Director John Ward. "What they have done through the year is amazing. It took a lot of strength and courage to follow through and keep it flowing. Between Joe and John, they really had the whole thing under control."

Budget Board Chairman Kenneth Booth called the vote "a cooperative effort by the community to understand the tough economic times we're in. The people worked together, the taxpayers trusted the Budget Board's position."

Given the pessimistic numbers coming from state officials Monday, Booth predicted next year's budget could be even harder to resolve.

Town leaders' push to drive residents into the high school auditorium Monday almost paid off too well. Only a couple of seats in the 720-chair hall were empty as Ericson called the session to order. According to a new town ordinance, out-of-town visitors were banished to the cafeteria to view the meeting on closed-circuit TV. About two dozen, said to be teachers, watched the proceedings and left after the school department vote.

Resident Todd Vander questioned how Lincoln can be fulfilling the state's "maintenance of effort" while decreasing the overall school budget by \$1.1 million.

Almond said the local effort remains the same at \$40.1 million, while the decrease is coming from reduced state aid.

Resident Patricia Lamoureux wanted to be reassured that teachers couldn't force a higher allocation later to cover raises.

"They have to work with the amount we give them tonight," said Booth.

Participants went on to dispose of the municipal budget nearly as quickly, save some time allotted to questions by Almond's Democratic foes of past years, Dean Lees Jr., John Cullen and John Barr. Financial Town Meetings are the one time of the year when town administrators must stand and answer every question posed by citizens. After fielding several from Lees about how lawsuit settlements are recorded in the budget and the need for a sewer capacity analysis study, the residents finally shut down Lees themselves with loud groans when he raised the old election controversy about a wall installed in front of Almond's brother's Cobble Hill Road house.

In the end, residents agreed to a combined municipal and school spending plan of \$69,985,669 for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

They'll contribute \$49,548,099 in local taxes to cover that and the rest will come from various local and state revenue sources.

The new tax rate has been estimated at a 50-cent to 60-cent increase. Tax bills go out by the first of July and the first quarterly payment is due by July 31.

Even Budget Board members had worried that cutting by Almond was too lean, but they endorsed it with the warning that residents should trim no more.

For their part, voters signaled early in the evening the direction they'd be taking when they loudly applauded the Budget Board message read aloud by Booth.

Most Town Hall departments will get less funding than this year, thanks in large part to salary freezes negotiated last winter by Almond for the upcoming year, combined with cuts in equipment and supplies. Every employee of Lincoln agreed to a pay freeze starting in July except members of the Lincoln Teachers Association. Meeting last Thursday, they tabled a decision.

Fliers handed out to voters walking into the meeting outlined a series of concessions made during contract negotiations last year that teachers say will save the district more than \$530,000 this year. They include an increase in the health coverage co-payment, giving up administrator of the day pay incentives, reducing family illness days, increasing the prepay legal co-pay, a 20 percent reduction in the tutorial pay, a \$700 cut in buy-back for health care.

Not used Monday was a system for secret paper ballot voting. Participants were given a package of tickets printed with bar codes. High school students were standing by to collect and tally the tickets as needed.

But strong "aye" followed every call for a vote Monday, negating any need for a secret vote. As the meeting ended, Booth, a 15-year veteran of the Budget Board who is stepping down, bid his farewells and won a round of appreciative applause.

Earlier in the evening, Ericson was re-elected as next year's moderator and Hagop Jawharjian was returned to the Budget Board.

Since no one filed to take Booth's seat, Ericson will be required to appoint someone. Booth told The Breeze he felt after 15 years he wanted to open the seat to someone with fresh ideas and was disappointed that no one else came forward.

Town Council President Ron McKenna, the most vocal advocate for abolishing the FTM, said he'd renew his faith in the town meeting if attendance keeps up next year.

Voters also approved by resolution taking \$175,000 from a surplus account to cover unexpected snow removal expenses last winter and \$500,000 for repairs to the Manton Dam using money in the open space fund.

They also approved \$303,916 in upgrades to the town's schools, including replacing the high school's north gym roof, replacing gym doors and renovating the music room.

Northern Elementary will get new carpeting in the office area and new flooring in the art room.

The Northern Early Learning Center will see an exterior security gate in the pre-school area, and new carpeting in four areas.

The middle school will get two sewer ejection pumps and a water service connection to the maintenance building.

Central Elementary will get new carpeting in two classrooms.

Lonsdale Elementary will see renovations to its south corridor.

Saylesville Elementary will get new carpeting in several areas and a roof repair.