

NORTHAMPTON

Residents want school arts saved

The move to restore the elementary arts program would add about \$130,000 to the proposed \$19.8 million school budget.

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Residents lined up to urge the School Committee last night to approve a recommendation from its Budget Subcommittee to restore the elementary school arts program to its proposed fiscal 2004 budget.

A decision by the full committee was expected, but as discussion continued last night no vote had been taken yet.

The move, if approved, would add approximately \$130,000

back into next year's proposed \$19.8 million School Department budget and avoid the need to eliminate the equivalent of 2.3 art teacher positions, Associate Superintendent Joseph P. Misterka said.

In addition, the subcommittee also is recommending the elimination of a proposed busing fee of \$180 a year that would apply to students in grades K-5 who live 1½ to 2 miles from the school they attend. If approved, this would reduce revenues supporting the budget about \$30,000.

"We've listened to people all spring about the (potential) loss of the art program," Misterka said. "I'm confident enough of (our latest) revenue projections, that we don't have to make those cuts."

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Saying an arts curriculum for elementary students provides a variety of benefits, Ernest Brill, at English teacher at Northampton High School, said, "It increases comprehension, precision and attention to detail in a very, very special way."

"At the high school, we see the end result," Brill said.

City Council President Michael R. Bardsley said art provides students a form of self-expression and a way to communicate, but also allows a student to create something alone, on an individual basis.

Referring to the earlier proposal to cut the elementary art program, Bardsley said, "I think we need to use this kind of close call as a kind of wake-up message," and added he hoped the community would "rally together" to ensure the art program is not eliminated in other tight budget years.

Even with the reinstatement of elementary art and the 2.3 teaching positions, the School Department budget under consideration last night calls for the elimination of the equivalent of 17.6 positions next year, Misterka said. Included are teachers, administrators, councilors, paraprofessionals and aides throughout the system.

"I think this is (still) a very painful budget," committee vice-chairwoman Lisa L. Minnick said. "I think that about three years ago, we started cutting into things that are no longer luxuries but rather essentials."

The reductions are being driven by an expected cut of \$1.6 million in state aid to the local school system next year.

By eliminating 15 positions and taking other measures on the city side of the municipal fiscal 2004 budget, approximately \$1.4 million of the schools' \$1.6 million projected loss has been replaced, said Mayor Mary Clare Higgins, who serves as chairwoman of the School Committee.

"It's bad," Higgins said of the cuts to local schools. "(The state has) shifted the cost of education from the relatively progressive income tax to the regressive property tax."